NF

ISSUE #60: HOT-BLOODED BEAT-'EM-UPS!

RIVER CITY GIRLS ZERO

DAWN OF THE MONSTERS

MARIO STRIKERS: BATTLE LEAGUE

INTERVIEW: BANNON RUDIS

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 3

LIVE A LIVE

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: SHREDDER'S REVENGE

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: THE COWABUNGA COLLECTION

RIVER CITY SAGA: THREE KINGDOMS

BOOK CLUB: DISRUPTING THE GAME BY REGGIE FILS-AIMÉ

POKÉMON SCARLET & VIOLET

THE PLUCKY SQUIRE

JULY/ AUGUST 2022

PLAN A TRIP TO LIMITED RUN RETAIL!

IN A WORLD where video game sales are going digital more and more each year, Limited Run Games has made it their mission to preserve the experience of purchasing and owning actual, physical cartridges and discs. And now the company has taken the next natural step in their evolution – preserving the brick-and-mortar video game shopping experience as well!

As of April 30, the all-new Limited Run Retail store has opened its doors in North Carolina, near the company's home base. The space has been painstakingly designed to hit its visitors with the maximum amplitude of nostalgia waves allowable by law, as it's decked out with pink neon lights, custom-patterned retro carpeting and even a soundtrack that was specifically commissioned just to be played over the speakers inside. The selection of games on sale include tons of Limited Run's own releases, of course, but you can also discover a variety of pre-owned treasures. There's even a claw machine stuffed with exclusive Shantae plushes! Altogether, it's more than worth the trip! **– LUCAS**

107 Edinburgh South Drive in Cary, North Carolina

ISSUE #60:
HOT-BLOODED
BEAT-'EM-UPS!

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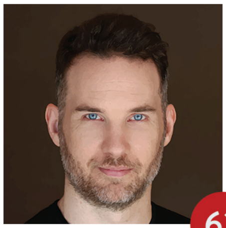
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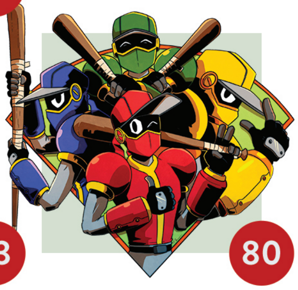
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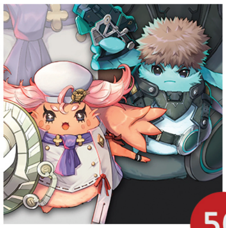
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ON THE COVER

Hey, buddy, you better watch out! Looks like a couple of crazed teenaged girls are flying through the sky straight toward your head, and they're getting ready to rearrange more than a few of your facial features! Yes, it's none other than the rambunctious rumblers from River City, Kyoko and Misako, striking a powerful pre-punching pose in order to promote their new sequel, River City Girls 2. In honor of their ferocity (and so as not to make them any madder), this cover is theirs!

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INBOX

STREETS AHEAD

Lace up your sneakers, grab your favorite baseball bat and make sure you've eaten a balanced breakfast, because it's time to head outside, hit the streets and throw down with any roaming bands of punks who get in your way! The milestone 60th issue of Nintendo Force is here, and in this edition we're celebrating the bare-knuckled beauty and brutality of beat-'em-ups!

The upcoming release of WayForward's all-new River City Girls 2 has inspired this selection of direction, as it's all about paying homage to the early glory days of the brawler genre while also working to push the design further forward into the future. We've got a new pre-release preview that will go into detail about what to expect from Misako and Kyoko's second big adventure, as well as our review of River City Girls Zero in this issue's Download section. Check it out to learn more about the origins of this pair of punch-happy protagonists!

Our central feature this time around is simply called "Go!" in honor of that exact two-letter encouragement so frequently flashing onto the screen in beat-'em-ups to motivate players to keep making progress. It's a go-to resource for an overview of how brawlers began, how they evolved over time and where the genre stands today.

Further supporting content keeping the momentum moving includes coverage of the two newest TMNT beat-'em-up releases, reviews of a pair of new books written about beat-'em-up history, an interview with Bannon Rudis (who is leading development on River City Girls 2) and a revival of our old "It's New to Me!" column in the Retro section, now reworked to give our writers a chance to fill in some gaps in their personal play histories. If all that sounds good, then start page-flipping! Go ahead! Go!

Lucas M. Thomas

LUCAS M. THOMAS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ISSUE #59:
MAY/JUNE 2022

The latest athletic clash of Mushroom Kingdom characters claimed the spotlight in our Sport Report, and I'm now happy to report that our full review of Mario Strikers: Battle League is ready to view in this issue! Flip ahead to Page 70 if you want to find out how the final game struck us. Then head back here for Player's Poll responses!

We asked a few punchy questions last time, including "Have you ever played a beat-'em-up or brawler game before?" and "If so, what was the first one you played, and when did you play it?" Then we wanted to know which of Nintendo's many brands you felt could best be applied to the brawler genre. Finally, a WayForward wishlist query: Which old beat-'em-up game would you want them to revive next, the same way they've breathed new life into the River City series? Here's what some of our readers had to say:

LETTERS

I have been playing beat-'em-ups since around 2013/2014, when my friends introduced me to both Castle Crashers and Scott Pilgrim vs. The World: The Game. For Scott Pilgrim, my favorite memory was when I played with two of my friends and we learned you could hit your friends with weapons and we spent almost three hours just messing each other up and laughing at each other. To date only one of the three of us has beaten the game, but we still always play whenever we can now that the game is back. And for Castle Crashers my favorite memory is playing with the same two people and sitting down and beating the game in one sitting.

I could honestly see Nintendo either turning Mario or Pokémon into a brawler, as both series have lots of strange but fun spin-offs that are departures from the original series. I do think a Donkey Kong brawler could be exciting as well, though I don't really think it would be something Nintendo would ever go for.

I did get to meet the directors of River City Girls at a Limited Run Games event recently and they were incredibly nice and sat and answered a few of my questions as well as signing my copy of River City Girls! **— MR. SIR**

Whoa whoa *whoa!* You can't just give away the secret that these people are *nice* in real life. They make beat-'em-up games! They're all ruthless street fighters, for sure!

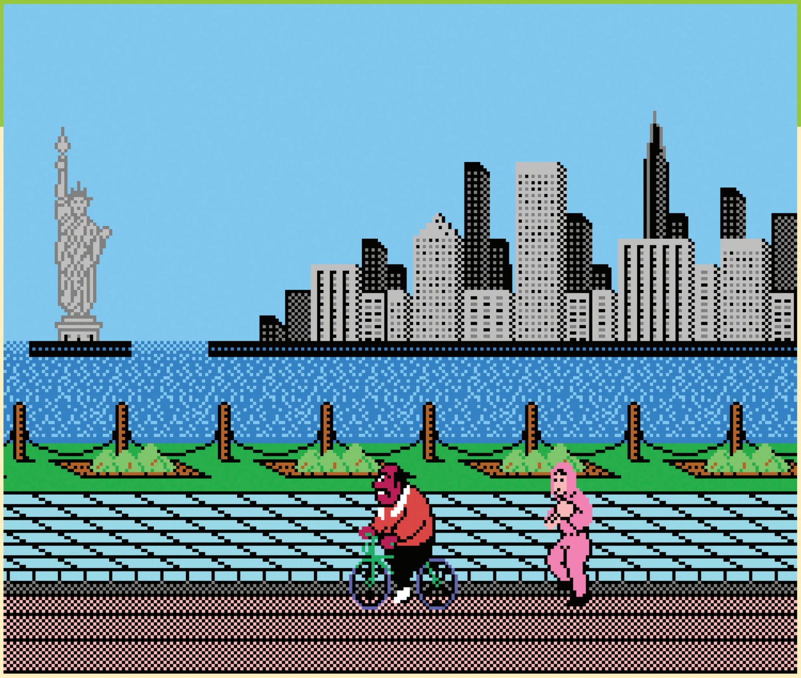
I think F-Zero could really benefit from having a beat-'em-up spin-off. Although I'd rather see the series return as a racer, it seems like a waste to have all of its colorful characters if they're stuck in vehicles the whole time. And Captain Falcon is more associated with fighting because of Smash Bros. now anyway!

The first beat-'em-up I remember playing was the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers game on SNES (probably around 2000). It was fun for me at the time, but nowadays it's pretty basic.

I'd like to see Final Fight make a comeback. The last new game it got that wasn't a port of the originals was Final Fight: Streetwise on PS2, and that game bombed. Taking the series back to its roots would be great. Its main competitor, Streets of Rage, had a decent comeback, so I don't see why Final Fight can't do the same. And some of the characters are still used in Street Fighter, so I don't think they lack recognition. **— JULIO CABRERA**

For beat-'em-up and brawler games, I've just played the Simpsons arcade game. (I haven't played many!) For Carter's favorite warden, I'm guessing Sabi? **— TANJIRO17**

Although I've never been very skilled at beat-'em-ups, I'm no stranger to the genre. One of first ones I can remember playing is TMNT III: The Manhattan Project on NES. As a kid at my Dad's house, we'd go to his room where he kept the NES and play The Manhattan Project while chowing down on popcorn shrimp and french fries. Those were the days! I can't wait for the Cowabunga Collection so my Dad and I can relive those days. **— CAMERON ASBURY**



LITTLE MAC VS. THE BIG APPLE

I feel a Punch-Out!! beat-'em-up spin-off could work well. (Maybe call it Punch-'Em-Out?) Going to a new perspective could be a fun new take on the series, and a way to bring the series back! Just imagine beating up waves of Glass Joe look-alikes! **— ZACHARY H.**

This is a wonderful idea, and I can picture how it would work perfectly! One day while Doc Louis is cycling by the water and Little Mac is chasing after him in his pink jumpsuit, thugs get the jump on them and steal Doc's bike! It's then up to the two boxing heroes to punch their way through the mean streets of New York City to find and save Doc's precious bicycle before it gets sold at a pawn shop and disappears forever. Mac is the fast-but-weaker fighter, while Doc brings heavyhitting power to every punch at the expense of being a lot slower on foot. (He's not used to having to walk anywhere without his wheels!)

I've never been too into Yoshi games, but Yoshi should get a fighting game. The different colors of Yoshis could have different effects. The babies could ride on them and add different powers. **— KYLA H.**

I've played a lot of beat-'em-ups in my time, but one of my favorite experiences was bonding with one of my dear friends over Scott Pilgrim vs. The World.

If Nintendo had to make a beat-'em-up, I wanna see 'em go all out! Go completely out of left field! I wanna see 'em use something like Splatoon, Kirby, Mother, or even the Miis! Imagine the possibilities!

Someone seriously needs to talk to Capcom about getting beat-'em-ups revived. I don't care if it's an actual remake of Final Fight: Streetwise, I want Final Fight back! It's my baby! **— RANTARO R.**
The newly revealed Street Fighter 6 has strong Final Fight vibes, centering its story on Metro City . . . but it's not confirmed for Nintendo's platforms yet. Maybe in the future?

Hello Nintendo Force,
This is Jason (father) and Ralph (son), ages 35 and 5. As per my son's request we will both be answering.

ANSWER #1
JASON: My first beat-'em-up was TMNT: Turtles in Time on the SNES, and I remember having a blast with my younger brother. We got the cartridge right before school started in the summer of '92 and were able to beat it with only a day to spare. We happily still have the game and console in our parents' house and even the grandkids have gotten to enjoy them.
RALPH: Castle Crashers with my Daddy on my Switch.

ANSWER #2
JASON: I actually disagree on this one, and think Nintendo has had quite a few beat-'em-ups/brawlers over the years. We have had the Hyrule Warriors, Fire Emblem Warriors, Kirby Clash and Pokémon Rumble games, just off the top of my head. Due to the nature of the genre, I think Metroid would be a great fit either in the vein of the old Alien vs. Predator arcade cabinet, or following more modern indie games like Guacamelee! Barring that, a retro-styled throwback using NES Remix as an inspiration.
RALPH: Mario, because he's my favorite!

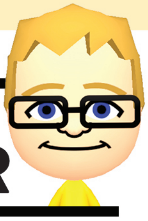
ANSWER #3
JASON: I have been waiting for a return of Viewtiful Joe for nearly two decades and can't believe they haven't even re-released the originals.
RALPH: I want a new Castle Crashers because it's really fun! **— JASON & RALPH**
I should have specified that I meant belt-scroll brawlers when I said Nintendo hasn't really touched the genre. We'll get into the differences later in this issue. (Also, thanks for the father/son tag-team responses!)

For first-party Nintendo games that could be converted to brawlers, hear me out: What if they created an F-Zero spin-off series that featured all of the racers jumping out of their cockpits and onto the streets? Falcon PUNCH! **— ETHAN WHITTED**

If WayForward, or anyone really, could have a chance to bring back a classic beat-'em-up, I would like to see someone bring back the Alien vs. Predator game. In the original, players could choose from two marines and two predators. They would fight off different variations of aliens leading to a massive Queen. It was a really cool idea.

I would take that, or a spiritual successor to X-Men with the Guardians of the Galaxy. That would be a perfect brawler. Lots of variety in the levels and bad guys. A match made in the far reaches of the universe, if you will! **— ADAM RENARD**
I call dibs on Drax! (If you let him stand perfectly still on the screen, he becomes invisible.)

CARTER'S CORNER



My favorite warden in Pokémon Legends: Arceus is . . . Sabi! Tanjiro17, you got it right!

Speaking of Pokémon *(speaking of Pokémon)*, we've got a lot to talk about!

I'm really excited to play Pokémon Scarlet & Violet! A new video revealed some new information recently, and my Dad's going to talk about that later. But I'm going to talk about it first!

First, they told us the professors. Yes, there are two professors! If you play Pokémon Scarlet, you'll find Professor Sada, and if you play Violet, your paths will cross with Professor Turo.

Besides that, they told us five new Pokémon! It started out with two Trainers having a battle. One sent out a Fuecoco. The other sent out . . . the Electric-type teddy bear, Pawmi!

Later, in the wild, we found some goofy dudes. First we saw Smoliv, the nervous-looking olive Pokémon. Then we saw the goofy hog, Lechonk! (Great name!) After that, the screen showed a deep canyon, and then a rushing sea, and on two islands were . . . Koraidon and Miraidon, the new Legendaries!

Quiz time! Will I play Scarlet or Violet? Bye bye for now!

POSING WITH SOME POSTERS

One of the Nintendo Power traditions we're happiest to be carrying on is the inclusion of snazzy wall posters alongside our issues! (And you don't even have to bend back any snagging staples to get them out and hang them up!) Several of you have reached out to us over the years with photos of NF posters used to decorate your homes, your offices and even a school classroom or two. Our latest poster children are big brother Ian Ross and little brother Neil, who've submitted these snaps of their wall art in action. (Framed, even!) Do you have an NF poster wall in place in your place of residence? If so, get in touch and let us know!

THE PLAYER'S POLL

Congratulations to **Zachary H.**, the winner of our brawler-themed Player's Poll! Your new chance to win is below, and this time around we're interested to read your responses to three questions about the number 3!

QUESTION #1

What is the best "3" game in video game history? Any game with a 3 in its name qualifies. Make your case for why your choice should be the #1 #3!

QUESTION #2

Splatoon 3 is launching soon, but there's still a lot we don't know about it. What's one new thing it needs to really succeed?

QUESTION #3

If you could wish any new "3" game into existence, which would you pick? Super Mario Galaxy 3? Sonic Adventure 3? Mega Man Legends 3? Why?

Send your responses to **PlayersPoll@NFMagazine.com** with the subject line "Player's Poll for Issue #61" – this time, one reader whose answers are picked for print will win their choice of a Nintendo Switch game with a 3 in its name!

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GET IN TOUCH!

Have a question? The best way to ask it is through Patreon's Direct Messaging system, which you have access to if you're one of our Patreon patrons! (Thanks in advance for your patience with receiving a reply!)

BY JOHN-CHARLES HOLMES

ROLLING OUT THE RED CARPET

The wait for Super Nintendo World in the States is nearly at an end!

SEVEN FULL YEARS.

I had to flip back through our issue archives to make sure I was recalling it correctly, and sure enough, Nintendo first announced that they were partnering with Universal to build a real Nintendo-themed theme park back in May 2015. So a little more than seven years ago, now! We first wrote about the project in our 15th issue, which had the first Splatoon game on its cover.

We knew, back then, that we'd have a long while to wait for such a massive undertaking to come to a point of completion. We also knew that Japan's fans would get first dibs, as the debut of what would come to be known as Super Nintendo World was going to be built in Nintendo's native nation first.

What's made the waiting worse is that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, travel to Japan has been difficult, and sometimes even impossible through the last two years – meaning not many foreign visitors have been able to make the trip to Japan's Super Nintendo World, which officially opened in March 2021. (I personally had entertained the idea of taking a trip there to cover the opening for NF; you could tell it was on my mind when we selected "Tokyo Takeover" for the theme of our 44th issue!)

Well, at long last, it seems like the waiting is almost over. Universal has just announced that the Hollywood location of Super Nintendo World is planned to open early next year. (We thought Orlando would get it first in America for the longest time, but it looks like California's beating Florida!)

Visiting Hollywood is an easier proposition than flying across the Pacific, so I'm sure many of you will begin making plans to go. Maybe I will too! If you see me lurking in the line for the Mario Kart: Bowser's Challenge ride or shopping for exclusive merch, make sure you flag me down and give me the official NF salute! **— LUCAS**

> "California is still a ways away from my native Kentucky, so getting there might still be tricky . . . should I just wait until the Florida version opens up in 2025 instead? I've waited seven years already, after all. What's two more? I've got some travel decisions to make. (Also, there's no such thing as an offical NF salute. Should there be? Maybe?!) – **LUCAS**"

PLAYSTATION 2: 155,000,000

PLAYSTATION 4: 117,200,000

SWITCH: 107,650,000

PLAYSTATION: 102,490,000

Rising in the Ranks

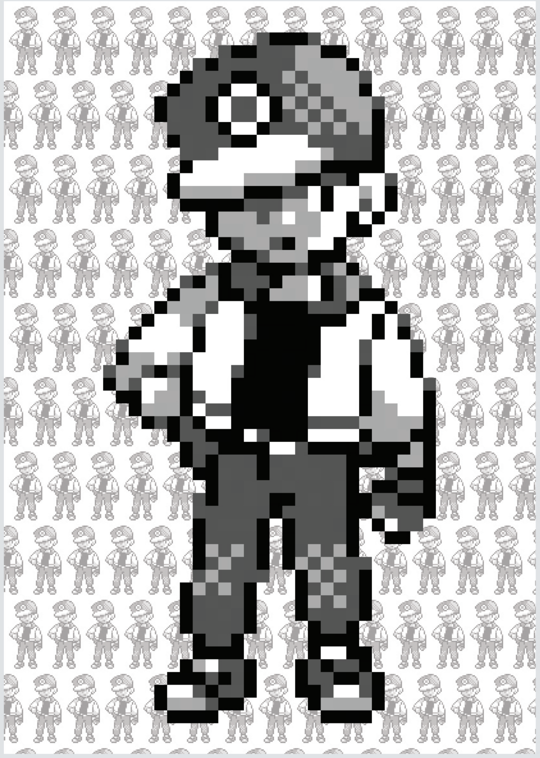
. . . and pushing PlayStations aside!

SWITCH SALES CONTINUE to soar!

Recent updated sales numbers released by Nintendo have revealed that the Nintendo Switch – collectively, in all its different forms – has risen in the all-time global sales ranking to become the third best-selling home video game console ever. It has now surpassed the global lifetime sales of the Wii, which ended its run at 101,630,000 units sold around the world, and it's also pushed past the original PlayStation, which now falls to fourth place with its total of 102,490,00 units sold.

The Switch now finds itself in striking distance of the PlayStation 4, as it's less than 10,000,000 units ahead in the race, and sales for it, while not down to 0, have nonetheless slowed considerably since Sony introduced the superior PlayStation 5. In fact, if you focus on just the United States, the Switch has already dethroned the PS4! It's likely that it will overtake it from all points of view soon enough.

The PlayStation 2 is the juggernaut still sitting at the top of the hill, though. Its dual functionality as both a video game console and a DVD player came at such a critical time in consumers' shift away from the VHS video format – and its price was so reasonable – that it sold like crazy! It's not untouchably out of reach, though. We'll just have to see if Nintendo keeps going with Switch long enough to strike at it! **– LUCAS**



One Among Many

The Pokémon games almost had 65,535 versions!

WE'VE GOT A new pair of Pokémon adventures on the horizon again: Pokémon Scarlet and Pokémon Violet are heading to the Switch this November, and if your home is anything like mine, you're already in the midst of a debate about which version you're going to play! But what if, instead of two choices to pick from, you had over 65,000 possibilities instead?

A recent push to translate decades-old interviews with the Pokémon series' key developers – conducted by prominent YouTube channel "Did You Know Gaming?" – has unearthed a truly surprising fact about the development of the original Generation I Game Boy games. Rather than having differently colored cartridges each with a different set of Pokémon to find in the wild, the developers at Game Freak at first intended to sell just one kind of cartridge – but it would randomize both the available set of Pokémon to catch and also the layout of the game world itself whenever players would first power it on.

How would this be achieved? By tapping into the Trainer ID number. Players are assigned a random five-digit number between 00001 and 65535 when they begin a new Pokémon Game Boy quest, and while that feature remains in the final games, it doesn't really do much other than add a drop of uniqueness to each player's adventure. But that same number was originally going to denote which one of 65,535 possible varieties of the game you were about to play, with a roguelike kind of randomization system rearranging elements in the Kanto region to make your game unlike anyone else's!

Ultimately, Shigeru Miyamoto was the one who said the idea was too complicated, and that's why they stuck with just two colors. **– LUCAS**

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Kirby Loves Warm Hugs!

Plug in this plushie and he will literally help you feel warmer!

THERE'S NO SHORTAGE of weird Kirby items out in the world, and a USB-powered warming plush ranks high on the list. For around $50, Bandai will ship you this functional toy that was released in May. This was actually the third release of the plush, as it has sold out quickly twice before! That's not surprising: Who wouldn't want to have a warm hug available on demand from Kirby whenever they wanted one?

Punchy & Pungent Plushes

Fangamer presents the River City Girls and, uh, the Great Mighty Poo!?

FANGAMER IS OVERFLOWING with great merch announcements recently! River City Girls got two shirts, a poster, a pin set and Misako and Kyoko plushes designed by Nina Matsumoto. Both are chibi style with accessories – Kyoko comes with a bat and Misako comes with spiked knuckles. Misako's backpack is also removable.

The other bit of merch that caused quite a stink was the announcement of the Great Mighty Poo plush. I never thought it possible, but here we are, corn teeth and all. He even sings his signature profanity-filled song. Yes, the whole thing. Uncensored.

Don't forget to snag a look at the new dancing Flowey plush from Undertale too! These toys just keep getting more and more creative. What will they think of next?

Jack In, MegaMan!

Can you execute construction of this model kit?

KOTOBUKIYA'S MODEL KITS have been wowing collectors for years. From Classic Mega Man to Mega Man X, they've been covering the Blue Bomber for ages, and many are still available due to reissues. Now, they'll be adding another spinoff series to the mix with their new MegaMan.EXE kit from Mega Man Battle Network.

Lan Hikari's NetNavi has four different facial expression parts that will be great to pose with his highly articulated body. Also included are his Buster Cannon and Life Sword. This figure will be released in October for around $60-$70. A more limited Dark version is also available for slightly more cash; it features a Metall figure in the Battle Network series' style.

These kits do not require paint and look great upon completion, but several YouTubers warn that they have fragile parts and require some skill to assemble. So be sure to approach construction with caution!

BY BRETT MARTIN

The Chosen Four

Snag some new Mother merch!

A HOST OF new plushes and other merch sold out in a matter of minutes on the Hobonichi Mother Project's Japanese-only website at the end of May. Chief among the new releases was a plush set featuring the Chosen Four heroes from EarthBound: Ness, Jeff, Paula and Poo all look gorgeous as detailed stuffies. Large Clayman and Boney plushes also flew off virtual shelves.

Don't despair, though, as a restock is planned for Winter this year, and previous items that have sold out are available for purchase on the website currently.

A Second Champion of Hyrule Appears

The graceful Princess Mipha is ready to make a splash in your home.

FIRST 4 FIGURES looks poised to release PVC figure statues of all four Champions from The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. (Or is it five Champions, since Link was the first in the line?) Revali was shipped recently and now Mipha graces us with her presence. Urbosa likely won't be far behind, but everyone is now worried about how much a scaled Daruk will cost! He dwarfs everyone!

The exclusive version of Mipha that is only sold on the F4F website has a light-up base identical to all the previous releases in the line, and it will cost $125. Special outer packaging and bonus F4F Points are also included with the normal retail box and authentication card. Each of these figures have so far featured the Champion holding their signature weapon, and the detail of every element is spot-on and worth the cost.

Dream Land's Other Denizens

If you've got enough plushes of Kirby himself, how about giving him a few friends?

SAN-EI HAS REVEALED a very exciting new set of non-Kirby Kirby plushes! Reaching back into the '90s, the plush developer pulled characters from Kirby's Dream Land 3 and Kirby 64: The Crystal Shards. Adeleine and Ribbon have previously released plushes, but they are extremely rare. Now there are two new plushes launching in July! Also in this set but launching in August are Mr. Frosty, Bio Spark and Rocky. All three have never had plushes and very little merch exists of them at all, so they're welcome additions. The last round in September will bring the Dream Land friends Pitch the bird, Nago the cat and ChuChu the octopus. Pitch is my all-time favorite Kirby character, and it's great to have a soft plush of a rock enemy, no?

1-2-Switch 2 May Be Struggling

Have Nintendo's developers bitten off more than they can chew?

NINTENDO'S SECRECY IS nearly impenetrable, especially in regards to new games in development. But in this case, the negative feedback has been so severe that it seems to have punctured a hole through the Big N's veil of mystery.

Reportedly, a sequel to 1-2-Switch has been in the works at Nintendo for a long time now. Also reportedly, it stinks.

Writing for Fanbyte, journalist Imran Khan broke this story in early June. According to anonymous sources who'd confided in him, Nintendo has been playtesting the game – called "Everybody's 1-2-Switch" – and groups of playtesters have been nearly unanimously negative in their reception to its new collection of goofy minigames.

"The target audiences Nintendo was hoping to hit – families with children – found the games boring; many didn't even want to play through entire rounds," wrote Imran.

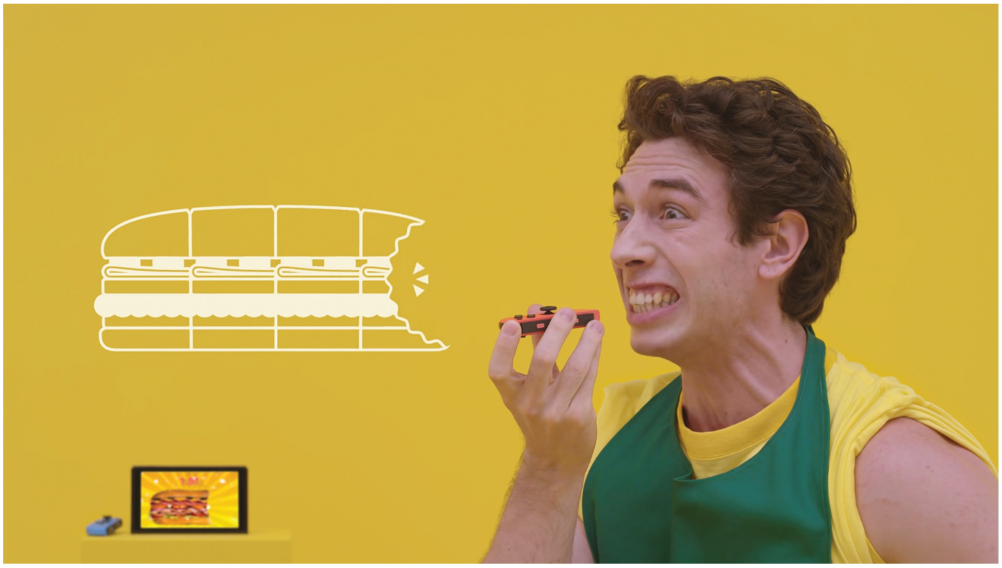
The game also apparently features a host character who is a bipedal horse simply named "Horse." So some testers have taken to calling the game as a whole, well . . . "horsesh**."

Things aren't sounding too good for Everybody's 1-2-Switch, huh? So what will Nintendo do about it?

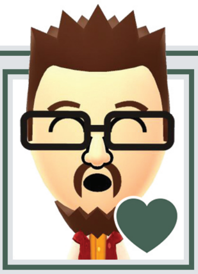
As of this writing, the company has yet to confirm the product even exists – even though another part of Imran's report claims that it already has boxes with printed labels ready, just waiting for the game to be finished and cartridges to be manufactured. It could be that Nintendo just trashes them all.

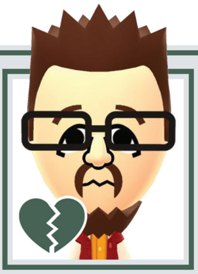
It's also possible that the game will just get sent back in for further development, if Nintendo takes the poor reception to heart and decides to improve the product before releasing it into the world. It's pretty rare that they attach their name to real stinkers – they've got a reputation to uphold!

Or it's possible that they'll ignore the naysayers and move forward with it as-is! Maybe it'll even be announced within the next week! The Metacritic score for 1-2-Switch was a lowly 58%, but that didn't stop it from selling over 3,450,000 copies. Maybe they'll just accept a low critical reception and hope for the best with sales! **– LUCAS**



Great!
A sequel to 1-2-Switch could be a whole lot of fun!





Oh.
Apparently, right now, it totally isn't.

FORECAST

A meteorological look at the biggest game and DLC releases currently scheduled to debut in the next few months.

FIRST UP FOR Nintendo's first-party releases in the month of July is a game that's only being published as a first-party title (its developer is Square Enix). It's the same arrangement the two companies had for Triangle Strategy a few months ago, as well as Octopath Traveler back in 2018. I guess the Big N just likes the HD-2D projects? It arrives July 22 and we've got a pre-launch preview and character intros for you beginning on Page 48.

NINTENDO WILL OFTEN go for long stretches with no new releases, and I sometimes wish they'd spread out the ones they do release a little more evenly. I mean, LIVE A LIVE is a beefy RPG – but they're only giving Day 1 players a single week to complete it before Xenoblade Chronicles 3, an even beefier RPG, goes live on July 29! (See Page 50.)

OUR COVER GAME for this punch-happy NF edition is River City Girls 2, which, as of this writing, has no totally locked-in release date. My secret communications with the development team have granted me special insight, however! (By which I mean I sent an email to Chris Hoffman, a.k.a. "The Hoff," and asked him.) Accordingly to He Who Must Not Be Hassled, RCG2 is on track for "Late Summer." Our new preview's on Page 40!

IF YOU'RE STILL working out your rage issues after breaking all the noses in sight in River City, you can keep the carnage rolling by jumping over into New York City! (And the sewers beneath it.) This compilation of classic TMNT titles also doesn't have a set date, but they'll want to ride the wave of Shredder's Revenge, so it won't be long! (Page 45.)

IF YOU'D LIKE a little more certainty to be able to plan your gaming over the next few months, I've got one more firm date for you to write on your calendar: September 9! That's the day when the Turf Wars between the Inklings and the Octolings (and the Mammalians?) will reignite in Splatoon 3. And when you'll be able to restart your summer job doing Salmon Runs too! We'll take a closer look at what to expect in this one next time.

FINALLY, I THINK I'll just keep this last spot on the Forecast locked onto Advance Wars 1 + 2 until Nintendo makes the call to release it. WayForward's work on the title is long past finished at this point, so here's hoping they'll get to see players enjoy it soon! Recent rumors say it may debut in December, one full year after it was first meant to. Maybe?

"If you're reading this, it's officially summertime in the Northern Hemisphere. (Unless you're reading this a lot further in the future after we published it. Hello, future people! Do you have flying cars yet?) Anyway, to my original point, summertime is hot, and you shouldn't spend all your time outside. For health reasons. Better to stay safely indoors and play lots of video games, right? (Nobody let my wife read this page. I'll get in trouble.) – LUCAS"

IF YOU'VE CONCLUDED your journey with Kirby in the Forgotten Land, you might be ready for another adventure with the Pink Puffball by now! Nintendo is more than happy to accommodate you, as they've recently added Kirby 64: The Crystal Shards to the lineup of Nintendo 64 games available to Nintendo Switch Online subscribers.

Kirby in the Forgotten Land is the hero's first 3D game, perspective-wise, but Kirby 64 was his first 3D game from a polygonal point of view. Meaning it was the first to use polygons for its graphics instead of 2D sprites! Though its action still pretty much stayed within the 2D realm of sidescrolling.

I've also recently been playing more of the Japanese NSO apps and discovering the differences between Japan's versions of games like Kirby 64 and the localized releases we got in the West! If you want to try them yourself, you'll first need to make a Japan-linked account over at Nintendo.com. (Sign up for a new account with an email address different from the one you've used before, and pick Japan as your location.) Connect that account to an empty profile on your Switch, then use that profile to access the eShop. You'll be taken to Japan's eShop and can download their NSO apps there!

On the Other Side of the River

Independent of WayForward's efforts, the Kunio-kun series continues to expand with games like River City Saga: Three Kingdoms.

KUNIO-KUN CAN'T BE contained within the walls of a single development studio! He's far too powerful!

Headlining this edition of our magazine is River City Girls 2, the latest in a line of games in the long-running River City/Kunio-kun series to be crafted by the creative minds at WayForward. But they're not the only ones still actively working to advance this franchise! The owners of the IP at Arc System Works have been both developing and publishing new titles to extend Kunio's legacy since they acquired the rights to the brand back in 2015. And even before that! Arc has had a hand in keeping Kunio up and punching in new games even as far back as 2008, in the DS days.

The reason few players in the West seem to know that, though, is because many of the series' games released through the last 15 years have only been released in Japan. We did get a localized release for games like Super Dodgeball Brawlers and River City Soccer Hooligans . . . we didn't get Nekketsu Kouha Kunio-Kun Special or Riki Densetsu. We did get River City: Rival Showdown . . . we didn't get Downtown Nekketsu Jidaigeki. It's been kind of a coin flip every time.

The last one I listed there was the largest loss, because if we'd gotten an English release of it, we'd be better prepared for the next game on the horizon: Downtown Nekketsu Jidaigeki was the game immediately preceding Kunio-kun no Sangokushida yo Zen'in Shuugou!, which is due to be launched in English on July 21 as River City Saga: Three Kingdoms. So let's try to fill in a gap in general American knowledge to better pave the way for its release!

The Kunio-kun series has had tons of spin-offs and side stories since its inception back in the '80s. Many of them have been sports games that

RECENTLY, IN RIVER CITY

Alongside WayForward's trio of River City Girls titles, the release of River City Saga: Three Kingdoms will bring the total number of Kunio titles available on the Switch up to seven. Here are Arc's previous three you may have missed!

DOUBLE DRAGON & KUNIO-KUN: RETRO BRAWLER BUNDLE

The best and most ambitious Arc System Works release in recent history has to be this impressive, imposing collection of 18 different Double Dragon and Kunio-kun games. They actually went back in time to all of the 8-bit Kunio games that never got localized in the NES era and finally translated them! Better late than never, huh? Included in the new arrivals is Downtown Special Kunio-kun's Historical Period Drama!, the first of the Jidaigeki spin-off series!

RIVER CITY MELEE MACH!!

The latest entry in another of the many Kunio-kun spin-off series that we missed the origin point for in the West (until the Retro Brawler Bundle), River City Melee Mach!! strips away all of the city exploration and role-playing progression to focus fully on the fighting. It's single-screen arena combat with free-for-all brawls where anything goes! It's also packed with just about every character in Kunio-kun history participating, including Misako and Kyoko!

STAY COOL, KOBAYASHI-SAN!: A RIVER CITY RANSOM STORY

Lastly, here's one that I'll admit totally flew under my radar when it landed in the Switch eShop back in November 2019. Kobayashi was one of the villains in the original River City Ransom — we first met him as Thor, the leader of the Zombies gang — but in this game he's been promoted to protagonist. It's up to him, his tagalong pal Mizoguchi and, of course, Kunio, to take on an evil organization from the future that's trying to invade the past. Time travel fun!

we've seen localized as everything from Super Dodge Ball to Crash 'N The Boys: Street Challenge. But one side story series that's never made much of a splash on our side of the Pacific has been the Jidaigeki games, or "period dramas." In these, the same cast of Kunio characters who are normally seen in a modern urban setting are instead depicted as being historical figures in the past.

Kunio and his friends are all high school students, right? So think of it like they're all putting on a school play and each acting in the role of some prominent person from the past. In River City Saga: Three Kingdoms, each of them is stepping into the shoes of a major player from China's Three Kingdoms period, the time in Chinese history from around 220 to 280 A.D. when the country was divided into three warring factions all vying for supremacy.

In this setting, Kunio himself has become Guan Yu, a famous military general fighting under the banner of Shu Han. River City Saga: Three Kingdoms will chronicle his quest to extend the Han dynasty and assert dominance over the other two kingdoms — by pummeling everyone who opposes him, of course! Kunio's classic array of punches and kicks will translate well to warfare, I'm sure.

And "classic" is an apt descriptor here, because River City Saga, for as wild and different as its setting and story will be, is still staying firmly rooted in the past. The character sprites are still in the 8-bit chibi style we first saw in River City Ransom, just upgraded with plenty of extra colors and frames of animation. You'll still get plenty of vintage tunes in the soundtrack, and familiar scenes like the shopping screen pictured above. A big black bar across the bottom of the display will host bits of character dialogue as you play, as it always has. (Did people "barf" in ancient China?)

Newer features breaking the mold of the old games include support for up to four players in a co-op mode and flashy "Tactics" moves that will do things like launching a barrage of flaming arrows across the screen — so this promises to be more than just another River City Ransom experience with a different coat of paint.

I'm excited to see how River City Saga: Three Kingdoms turns out, but beyond this one release I'm excited that this venerable brand has gotten to a point where multiple branches extending out from its '80s origins can be thriving at the same time. Maybe WayForward's work will encourage Arc to keep localizing more of their titles as Kunio keeps growing up! **— LUCAS**

THE GIRLS MAKE THE CUT!

While Kunio is the main character in Three Kingdoms, Arc is giving special attention to the River City Girls in the game as well! Both Misako and Kyoko are in, and both are playable. It's another sign that both studios working on the series have a strong partnership together!

Countdown to Shutdown #2

More great (or at least interesting) games to grab before they're gone!

IN OUR LAST issue, we presented the bad news that both the Wii U eShop and the 3DS eShop are due to be shuttered soon. We then took the opportunity to point you all toward a few games worth downloading before they disappear from availability – and now we're back to do it again, with a second set of selections.

Though the situation is now a bit more dire! The first "countdown to shutdown" milestone has come and gone: As of May 23, you can now no longer use credit cards to directly pay for games in either of the two older eShops. Now your best bet is snagging eShop cards from retailers like Walmart or GameStop, because you will still be able to redeem them for their listed value until August 29. Though that deadline is fast approaching too! Make sure you use any eShop cards you might still have sitting around somewhere. You wouldn't want them to be rendered inert!

And with that, it's on to our eShop selections. Peruse these picks! **– LUCAS**

RIVER CITY: KNIGHTS OF JUSTICE

WHILE TWO 3DS releases in the River City series scored physical cartridges – Tokyo Rumble and Rival Showdown – this more fanciful adventure launched as and has remained an eShop exclusive. Like the Three Kingdoms game we just finished previewing a page ago, Knights of Justice is another of the "What If?" Kunio-kun games that has the classic cast of characters transported into an alternate time period to play dress up and, uh, fight dragons?

Yes, this game isn't quite a historically accurate retelling of the events of the medieval age, but we wouldn't want it to be! The fantasy setting also synergizes beautifully with River City's role-playing features, as leveling up your fighters, chatting with townsfolk and sleeping in inns all feel more appropriate when your hero's wearing a suit of armor. **– LUCAS**

JUNE 2017

3D CLASSICS: URBAN CHAMPION

URBAN CHAMPION IS is one of those enigmatic NES games that almost no one seems to like, yet Nintendo keeps bringing back again and again – and I couldn't be happier to have it! For one of the earliest releases to hit the 3DS eShop, this "classic" received the 3D Classics treatment, giving it a bit of a graphics and effects overhaul. What were once pixels are now voxels, giving you an optional, more 3D view of the action as each match progresses, whether you're using the glasses-free 3D or not. Other new features include a ranking system, wireless two-player action and even some slightly tighter controls. The result is an overall more polished product that still retains the charm of the original, effectively making this the definitive version . . . of the Nintendo game no one other than me seems to want. **– DAVID**

AUGUST 2011

PICROSS 3D: ROUND 2

THERE'S NO DOUBT you've played Picross before – but have you ever played Picross . . . IN 3D?! A third dimension gets added to this expanded sequel for an added level of depth and challenge, with puzzles that are equal parts stimulating and addicting. Once you start playing, literal *hours* will melt away before you've even noticed! Picross 3D: Round 2 is absolutely loaded with that toyetic Nintendo charm, with candy-coated visuals and a relaxingly jazzy soundtrack. And if 300+ puzzles aren't enough for you, you can even scan in a few amiibo to unlock more sets! Just don't be scared off by the $30 price – I've found myself returning to this puzzler again and again over the years. **– JOHN-CHARLES**

APRIL 2014

STYLE SAVVY: STYLING STAR

THE MOST RECENT title in the Style Savvy franchise, Styling Star, only got a digital release in North America. While it still deals with managing clothing stores and making recommendations to customers, Styling Star's storyline has you assisting three young women on their journeys to stardom: clumsy country girl Rosie Mayfield, tech-savvy Alina "Alinatron" Golding and the sheltered hotel heiress Yolanda "Lady Moon" Artemisia. It's got a lot of heart, some great character development, and songs that will be stuck in your head for ages. Fashion games have a reputation for being nothing more than virtual paper dolls or even shovelware, but the Style Savvy franchise has stood out for its easy-to-grasp mechanics. If you're a fan of idol anime and/or love dressing up, be sure to grab Styling Star before the 3DS eShop takes its final bow! **– REBECCA**

DECEMBER 2017

POKÉMON RUMBLE U

THE MUCH-MALIGNED Pokémon Rumble series holds a strange place in the franchise's history. These top-down pseudo beat-'em-ups never became hits, yet Nintendo kept publishing them. With stiff, low-poly graphics and stupefyingly simple gameplay (walk, attack, repeat), the low cost to churn the series out must have justified whatever profits they were able to bring in. That said, with Pokémon Unite currently sitting pretty in Pokémon's "multiplayer real-time action game" spot, the Rumble sub-series may not have a path forward.

That goes triple for Pokémon Rumble U. Not only did it sell poorly, but it also relied on a now-dead trend. All the Rumble games are about Pokémon toys coming to life, but Rumble U was the first one to go literal with that concept. It was released in 2013, alongside a set of 23 Pokémon Rumble NFC figurines, a year before the first amiibo ever hit shelves. A full set of these funny-looking figures is going for $350+ on eBay, and the game they were made to support is about to become just as hard to acquire! **– JONATHAN**

AUGUST 2013

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: CHRONICLES OF MYSTARA

BEAT-'EM-UPS WITH RPG mechanics are not uncommon, but the two classic Dungeons & Dragons games Tower of Doom and Shadow over Mystara took the concept considerably further than the genre had seen before. Both games feature deep storylines with multiple branching paths, character options, a leveling system, magic spells, item upgrades and more. It's all wrapped up in a combination of Capcom's signature '90s brawler style and Dungeons & Dragons lore. Chronicles of Mystara could have just been straight ports of these two arcade classics, but Capcom went the extra mile. There are display options ranging from widescreen support to a mode that makes it look like you're playing on an arcade cabinet, and other modern trappings that make these games more accessible than ever. If you're looking for something a little deeper than your average beat-'em-up, this is an excellent option! **– KRIS**

SEPTEMBER 2013

Misako & Kyoko's First Fight

RIVER CITY GIRLS ZERO

AS GREAT AS River City Girls was, most players would agree that its ending wound up being too meta for its own good. To properly appreciate the big twist required a basic comprehension of the wider Kunio-kun franchise, which posed a problem since most entries had never left Japan. And most important of those unlocalized titles was Shin Nekketsu Kouha: Kunio-tachi no Banka, a 1994 Super Famicom brawler that served as RCG heroines Misako and Kyoko's playable debuts – its absence from our shores robbed us of crucial context.

WayForward has offered to plug that plot hole by porting Kunio-tachi no Banka onto modern platforms, rechristened as the long-lost prequel River City Girls Zero. The game itself is unaltered from its 16-bit incarnation save for not one but two English localizations: one that retains the characterizations established in RCG and another that more directly adapts the Japanese text. (A stink was raised on social media when this choose-your-own-translation was revealed, but rest assured that the original intent is properly conveyed in both scripts.)

To make the package more enticing, WayForward inserted all-new intro and outro manga cut-scenes, in which Misako and Kyoko come into possession of a retro game cartridge that chronicles their first adventure alongside boyfriends Kunio and Riki. Composer Megan McDuffee also returned to deliver another pair of bangin' vocal tracks, opening with "Get Ready for the River City Girls" and finishing strong with the next-level "Mean Street" hip-hop anthem. For the latter, McDuffee was able to partner with the exceptional DEMONDICE, a Japan-based American rapper who's so deadly on the mic that you'd swear she was the Grim Reaper of Rhyme (or at the very least the Grim Reaper's apprentice)!

Window dressing aside, does the game live up to the hype? Honestly, no. Despite the retcon efforts, the base game here remains a relic from the early '90s that doesn't stand the test of time. It also doesn't help that its ties to RCG and other beloved River City entries result in certain expectations that can't be met – through no fault of the original development team Almanic, who obviously couldn't have predicted the state of the series in the West three decades into the future.

It all starts with the story: High school tough guys Kunio and Riki are tossed into juvenile detention for a hit-and-run they didn't commit, and upon learning that they were framed by a Kunio lookalike, they break out and hit the streets for answers. Oh, and their girlfriends join their quest for vengeance a little later. As you can see, our butt-kicking ladies are merely supporting actresses rather than the headliners that a title like "River City Girls Zero" would imply.

The game plays quite differently from previous series installments, the reason for which lies in the fact that there are in fact two branches of Kunio-kun brawlers. The one most are familiar with is the Downtown Nekketsu series, which is focused on open-world exploration, RPG stat management and a lighthearted tone. Then there's the Nekketsu Kouha series, marked by more traditional, more serious belt-scrolling action. This game is part of the second group, resulting in a linear affair with a heavy emphasis on dramatic storytelling. Even then, it fails to include genre staples like equippable weapons.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: WAYFORWARD
DEVELOPERS: WAYFORWARD, ALMANIC & LIMITED RUN GAMES
RATING: T

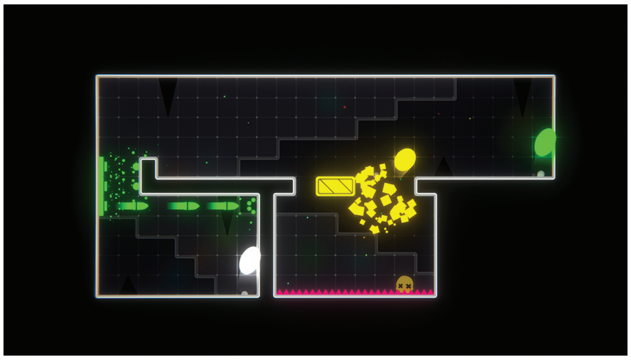
The big hook in Zero's favor is that, in both single player and cooperative modes, you can cycle through any of the four available pugilists on the fly by tapping either Minus or ZL. Unfortunately, if one character dies, your game immediately ends even if the remaining crew is rockin' full health. Furthermore, there are no item pickups, and stamina doesn't recharge when placing a character on standby. At least health replenishes after clearing a number of screens, while death only sends you back to the start of the current room, but that simply means completion is less about clever combat strategy and more about brute-force attrition.

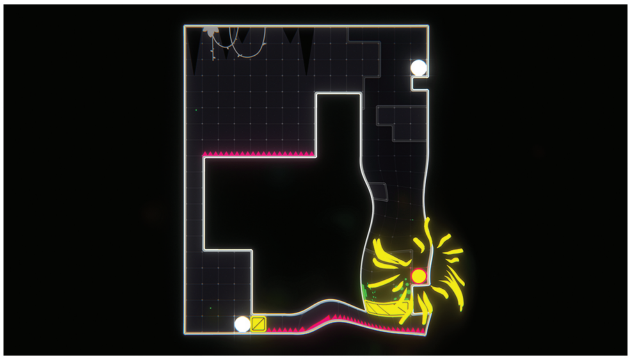
Speaking of combat, fights are sluggish, drawn-out and lacking in variety. Every enemy, from the early game onward and including bosses, wields a nearly identical skillset and can easily break through your combos. The best method to evade damage is to spam your special techniques to instantly knock foes down, yet at no point does the game properly explain how to perform them. (Hold L or R to block, then press one of the four face buttons, by the way.) Not even the moves list that WayForward added to the home menu mentions these critical abilities!

What really dates Zero is the cringe-inducing mistreatment of its female cast. Instead of swinging punches, Misako and Kyoko throw open-hand slaps because ha ha gender stereotypes, am I right? And it's bad enough that the duo aren't playable from the start, but then they're forcibly written out of the narrative just before the climax in a most unceremonious fashion – a moment that made me so mad I nearly dropped the game entirely!

Big props to WayForward for the attempt, but Kunio-tachi no Banka doesn't deserve to be placed on such a high pedestal. All Zero is good for is rounding out your Kunio-kun collection . . . and savoring McDuffee's infectious tunes. **– TONY**

6.0





The Return of Atari?

KOMBINERA

ONCE ONE OF the mightiest brands in all of video games, Atari is a very different company today. Recently though, buried underneath piles of speaker hats and NFTs, they seem to have found a connection to what made them successful in the first place in the form of their "Recharged" retro arcade game revival series. Now, they've taken another step forward and actually created their first proper new gaming IP in a very long time. And wouldn't you know, it's actually good!

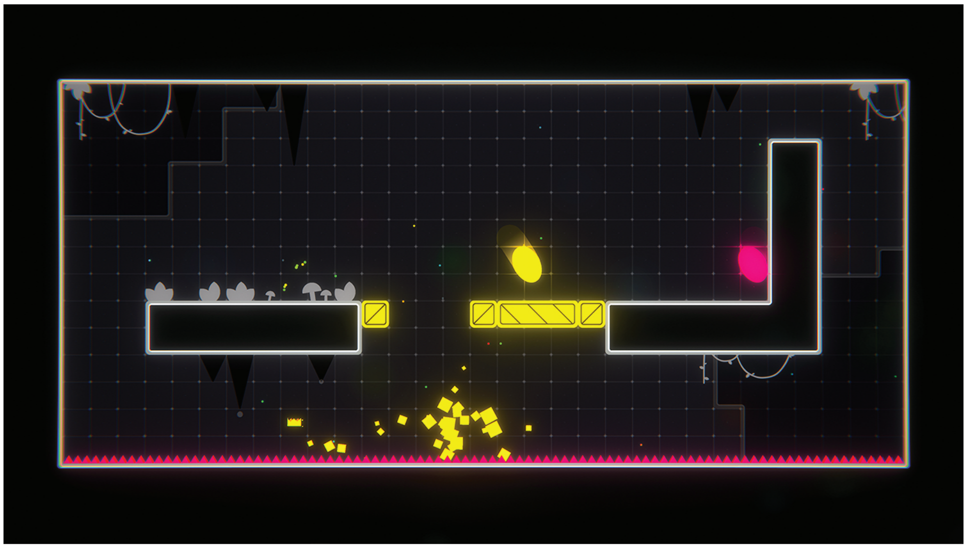
Kombinera is a puzzle platformer in the same vein as BOXBOY! or Solomon's Key. You take control of a series of balls and you have to cause them to collide with one another without getting killed. The trick is, you control all of the balls on-screen at the same time! If one moves left, they all move left. If one jumps, they all jump. You get the idea.

Balls come in multiple colors, and those colors correspond to stage hazards that those specific balls are immune to. Pink balls can safely roll over pink spikes, green balls don't take damage from green laser fire, blue balls can travel through blue walls and so on. These effects can be combined if you manage to get the balls to run into one another, but that can also sometimes become a detriment. For example, yellow balls can break through yellow blocks – but if those yellow blocks make up a platform you need another ball to cross, you'll have to safely manage your yellow ball while maneuvering the other one across said bridge. The ability to manage multiple tasks at the same time is essential, and even early on, things can become incredibly complicated.

However, the game does a great job of helping you maintain your concentration. The graphics are minimal yet attractive, and the music is nice, easy background fare, even if it does repeat a bit too often. You'll also want to change the default controls from analog to D-Pad to help you handle the game's many precision-based movements.

As for content, Kombinera is surprisingly massive, containing eight worlds made up of over 300 stages. Many have special crown icons that you can collect to unlock even more bonus levels, on top of a set of tasks called "accomplishments" to challenge yourself even further if you so choose. Of course, it's unlikely this game will leave you wanting for more challenge, as it can be incredibly difficult! Much of my time with Kombinera has been spent just staring at the screen for minutes on end trying to figure out a proper strategy. Fortunately, even though levels are timed, there's no time limit, and the same goes for lives. So while it can be a rather mentally taxing experience, it's rarely what I would consider stressful.

This is exactly the kind of game Atari used to make back in its heyday, except considerably more modern. Regardless of whether or not you're a fan of the Atari brand, though, Kombinera is a fantastic little puzzle game. It may occasionally be too difficult for its own good, but if you're into this kind of thing, you're just about guaranteed to have a ball. **– KRIS**



7.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ATARI
DEVELOPER: GRAPHITE LAB
RATING: E

SECOND OPINION

A Whole Bunch of Brawlers

CAPCOM BEAT 'EM UP BUNDLE

AT LONG LAST, 10-year-old me has been avenged!

Since I was born in 1981, I just so happened to be at the perfect age to fully appreciate the arcade-going experience at the end of the '80s and through the early years of the '90s – the era when belt-action brawlers reigned supreme. I'd happily step inside dimly lit spaces in shopping malls, side rooms at bowling alleys or extra buildings adjacent to miniature golf courses with a small stack of quarters in hand, ready to be wowed at each latest arcade release as I tried my best to beat them.

I never did. Always, without fail, I would fail, falling well short of the end credits for any of these kinds of adventures. And that was by design! The coin-op cabinet makers of the day preyed on kids like me, ensuring each release was too difficult to ever make much progress in without a seriously heavy investment of cash. Enemies would absolutely overflow the screen in nearly all these games, such that you'd constantly take damage, constantly get defeated and constantly have to drop in more and more quarters in order to continue.

. . . But not anymore! Now, years later, re-releases of these same old games are available to own in our homes, mercifully set to "Free Play" mode. No coins required! You can just keep getting right back up no matter how many times you fall. It's magical! It's as if I'm 10 again, but this time with an infinite number of quarters in my pocket.

The Capcom Beat 'Em Up Bundle first launched back in 2018, and at the time Matthew T. offered his thoughts on it in our 37th issue. I decided to pick it up for myself as we began to work on this beat-'em-up-inspired issue, wanting to reacquaint myself with the genre. I'm glad I did!

For one, I've finally finished Final Fight for the first time in my life. The feeling of redeeming the losses I suffered at the hands of that same game over 30 years ago is exciting, and witnessing afresh just how unfair the enemy swarms and placement of obstacles are in it – in later levels especially – has given me fresh perspective on that piece of my childhood. I also have memories of dropping quarters into Knights of the Round and The King of Dragons in the distant past, and they're both here too, so revisiting them has been a pleasure as well.

But probably the most interesting part of playing compilations like this is getting to discover games you've never had a chance to try before, even if they first released decades ago. Captain Commando is a trip: It's got humor on full display from the start, as one of its playable heroes is a baby driving a man-sized mech! Battle Circuit, another game here, lets you play as a pink ostrich.

Brawlers are just so much more fun when they fully lean into pure nonsense, and I think that quality was really established by Capcom in this particular set of titles. But there is real innovation to be found, too! Armored Warriors, another inclusion, features giant mechs with weapon systems that are swappable on the fly. It's another winner!

If you've got enough digital cash to spend on it, this endless-quarters experience is worth buying into!
– LUCAS

7.5
MATTHEW T.

8.0
LUCAS

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: CAPCOM RATING: T

Punching Polygons

BREAKNECK CITY

NEXT TO THE shoot-'em-up, the beat-'em-up is the simplest style of action game. The problem is, when something isn't made of a lot of parts, every little piece of what's there has more proportionate value. If all you do in a game is walk, attack and get attacked, then all three of those ingredients better be fun. Otherwise, you're in for a world of hurt.

Breakneck City takes place in that hurting world. It's a shame, too, because there is a lot to like about the game. The chunky, N64-style graphics have a punky, "new-stalgic" feel. They're a perfect match for the story, which focuses on two women defending their broken-down Canadian town from a certain property-hungry ex-President.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: EASTASIASOFT DEVELOPER: RENEGADE SECTOR GAMES RATING: M

People with no interest in feminism and/or the early days of polygon-based graphics may feel alienated by those choices, but I was immediately drawn into the high-contrast color palette and the prospect of playing as two tough ladies who don't give a hoot about being ladylike.

Playing the game, though? It's anything but a step forward. Being fully 3D means that you can aim your punches in any direction, but the hit detection isn't too great. It's easy to accidentally aim a punch in slightly the wrong direction and whiff what should have been an easy hit. There are infinite continues and multiple mid-level checkpoints, so these frustrating losses won't set you back too far, but that's not the point.

The real problem boils down to a lack of depth. Winning is more about persistence than making progress, because practicing and building your skills won't do much for you here. With the exception of boss fights, which require minor strategy tweaks for a win, victory here is usually determined by who lands the first hit. Most enemies are walking punching bags, though a few of the bigger boys are able to block, so you instead have to knock them into a meat hook or a trash can to take them out.

This mechanic makes for a few surprisingly comedic moments, giving the girls an opportunity to gloat over their helpless would-be assailants. There's also a dash button that can trigger some special moves like spinning on street lamps or vaulting over fences. These maneuvers add a touch of variety to an otherwise bog-standard beat-'em-up.

It's easier to forgive these faults when you consider that the whole game was made largely by one person. I like what developer Alec Stanton was going for here, but on the whole, Breakneck City feels more like a test to see if its creator could make a game in the genre, and less like proof that he should have. His more recent games, like the third-person shooter Escape from Terror City (not yet available on Switch) feel a lot more finished.

If your main problem with most modern beat-'em-ups is that they are too complicated and fancy looking, then you may prefer the straightforward action here, but anyone expecting more than an hour or so of mindless man-bashing in a primitive 3D game engine will walk away disappointed. **– JONATHAN**

6.5

Streets Above, Dungeons Below

YOUNG SOULS

THE WORLD NEEDS more stylistic brawler RPGs. Thanks to 1P2P, we have here a game with a great story, superb writing and excellent gameplay. Unfortunately, some nagging technical issues and design decisions really tug gamers out of the immersion.

Jenn and Tristan are angsty teen twins who were adopted by The Professor, a man who is deeply involved in research into portals and goblins – or "gobbons," as they call themselves. When The Professor goes missing, the rebellious pair stumble upon a gate to the underworld and the adventure begins.

The crux of Young Souls is its brawling, but there are also a number of errands to do in town, like shopping for clothes and shoes, meeting with Mayor Walden, trading in junk and working out at the gym. That last one requires tokens you get by leveling up when you sleep. The minigames in the gym involve button holding or mashing and help you gain a slight edge in your stats, but they're all very hard to master.

Once your character is decked out, you choose your level and jump through the gate, facing an imposing onslaught of ever more powerful goblins with increasingly smart tactics. Each new boss is unique in their fighting style, and it's a puzzle to find out when to dodge and when to attack.

I played solo, but co-op is also available. Solo players swap between the two siblings with the L Button, and I had one twin be lightweight and fast, and the other be a slower powerhouse.

It was fun to discover and customize the different playstyles, but once I found a good set of weapons for each twin, I used them for the rest of the game and just upgraded them through the Goblin Market.

I rarely bought from the Market because I would always find better weapons and armor in chests, and I felt that I missed out on playing with some cool weapon types because they were too weak for normal progression. Once I upgraded bombs and arrows, I sort of broke the game. Almost every fight was easily won by fighting with ranged weapons.

The game was still interesting in its writing and story, and later levels figured out ways to keep the challenge, but it was just too tempting to cheese the bosses. Refreshingly, your challenge is completely customizable at any time. If a fight is too difficult, there are many settings to change, like enemy speed, attack speed, general difficulty and more to make it enjoyable at no hindrance to completion rate.

Young Souls is a great game, but it's kept from being truly great on Switch because it absolutely CHUGS on Nintendo's console. Load times are long, the framerate can be embarrassingly low and the game crashed while loading levels multiple times. For a four-year-old game, you'd think that the developers wouldn't have to rush a port. Perhaps a patch will alleviate some of the technical problems, but as it stands it's frustrating.

So Young Souls succeeds when it comes to style, and the world it invites you to explore – both the human world above and the goblins' underworld below – is truly inviting. But for this game, you'd be better served to play on PC, PlayStation or Xbox instead of the Switch. **– BRETT**

7.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: THE ARCADE CREW
DEVELOPER: 1P2P RATING: M

Catch My Drift?

SLIPSTREAM

RETRO ARCADE-STYLE RACERS are awesome, and there have been a number of modern takes in recent years that have helped keep the genre alive. Slipstream attempts to take a slightly different approach, and while it doesn't completely succeed, there's definitely a game worth playing here if you're into this sort of thing.

First and foremost, while the audio and especially the visuals are clearly inspired by Sega's classic Outrun, the game itself plays dramatically differently. Slipstream is all about drifting and drafting. You will spend at least 80% of every race drifting around corners, and that isn't an exaggeration. Quite literally nearly every moment of this game is spent managing various drifts.

The rest of your time is spent trying to catch a "slipstream," otherwise known as drafting, where you follow another driver's direct path and gain a boost of speed from successfully pulling it off for a long enough period of time without crashing. But drifting is the real focus here, and while handling turns has naturally always been a big part of any racing game, the focus on drifting here can not be overstated. If you don't like drifting, Slipstream is absolutely not the game for you.

Then who is this game for? Sega fans! The visuals are modeled heavily after Sega's arcade "Super Scaler" games. Think Outrun, Space Harrier or After Burner. They run much more smoothly here though, and are presented in HD, so while it aims to recreate the look of those old games, it never quite nails it. There's a certain spectacle and variety that's missing, too. It's a valiant effort for sure, but it just barely misses the mark.

The Sega fandom doesn't stop at the in-game visuals either. Several courses are named after Zones from Sonic the Hedgehog games, and some of the menus are dead ringers for Sonic's stage startup screens.

As far as options and play modes go, Slipstream unfortunately winds up feeling a bit light. There isn't much of a campaign to speak of, and there are only a few cars to unlock. It also requires some serious mastery of the game's mechanics to earn any sort of progression. There's a control option that automatically drifts for you, but unless you can master manually performing drifts, the computer is going to absolutely trounce you in no time. However, while it can feel a bit unfair, the game does have one particularly cool mechanic in place to help mitigate things, and that's its super-cool rewind button!

Often you'll find yourself in the middle of an especially long drift when a sharp turn comes out of nowhere and you crash. Whenever this happens, you can hold the rewind button for up to five seconds and give it another go. You have to wait a bit for the rewind feature to recharge before you can use it again, but it's a great detail that goes a long way to make things seem more fair.

Slipstream may not be perfect, but it was clearly made with a specific vision and a ton of love. There are plenty of other options out there for sure, but if you're really into drifting and retro racers, you may get better mileage here than most. **— KRIS**

6.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: BLITWORKS
DEVELOPER: ANSDOR
RATING: E

Detectives Seek Video Evidence

THE CENTENNIAL CASE: A SHIJIMA STORY

IF I'VE LEARNED anything from playing The Centennial Case: A Shijima Story, it's that the mark of a good mystery isn't leading you to one plausible conclusion. Rather, it leads you to several, with only the smallest of details differentiating the truth from speculation.

This mystery adventure game from Square Enix excels at this concept and builds its gameplay around it. As you solve its cases, every clue has some importance, but determining the ones that are most vital is what matters. It's both agonizing and exciting!

The Centennial Case centers around the Shijima family, who have experienced tragic deaths over the course of a century. You take on the role of mystery author Haruka Kagami, who is enlisted by her friend Eiji Shijima to solve the 100-year-old mystery involving his family.

The story plays out through live-action scenes like a well-crafted movie. The cast are amazing in their roles, whether they're more on the relatable side like Haruka (played by Nanami Sakuraba) or if they're meant to be more comical like the eldest Shijima brother Kazunaga (played by Motoki Fukami).

Because of this, I definitely advise playing the game with the Japanese dub and subtitles instead of the English dub. I have to give full credit to Square Enix for including both options, though – it's clear they put real effort into localizing this title for Western players.

Even more impressive are the incredible settings the story takes place in. The game features mysteries that take place in Japan during three time periods: 1922, 1972 and 2022. Some of the locales include the beautiful and ominous Shijima estate, both in the past and present, a nightclub in 1972 and a traditional Japanese inn in 1922.

I couldn't get too mesmerized by the visuals, because the game quickly taught me to observe every scene carefully. It notifies you when something within a scene is a clue. It's important to pay attention to what's happening at that moment so you have the full context.

After you watch all of the scenes associated with a mystery, the game transports you to Haruka's cognitive space. In these sections, you have a long grid where you connect clues to their associated mysteries to form hypotheses.

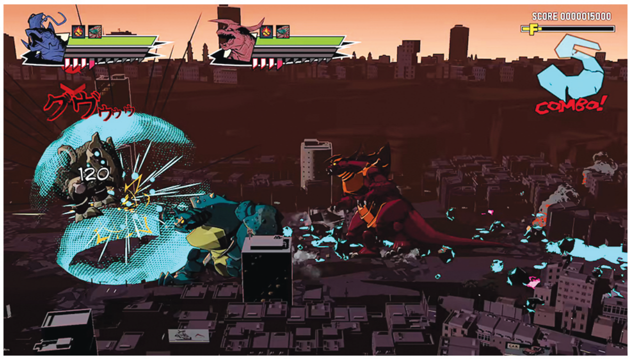
It's up to you to decide which hypotheses are correct and worth using during the Solution Phase, where you return to the live-action scenes and confront suspects. However, this phase includes my only issue with the game.

Sometimes the dialogue options in the Solution Phase don't adequately describe what they mean. I would choose one, but then what the character said didn't match up. It's certainly not a huge flaw, but I think it could've been better since the cases are long and filled with several details to remember.

If you're a fan of mysteries in any media, The Centennial Case: A Shijima Story is absolutely worth your time. Its gameplay is engaging. Its presentation is engrossing. And I hope I've made enough of a case for it here for you to want to try it out!
– MAGGIE

9.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RATING: T



Colossal Combat

DAWN OF THE MONSTERS

THIS NEW RELEASE from 13AM Games brought back memories of playing King of the Monsters on SNES. While a lot of time has passed since that game was made, the premise has only risen in popularity. With movies like Pacific Rim and Godzilla vs. Kong doing well at the box office, it's a good time to cash in on the kaiju craze.

Dawn of the Monsters essentially boils down to a belt-action brawler with a deep story and lots of customizable elements. Set in the year 2065, humans have awoken "the Nephilim," and the violent colossi have laid waste to most cities. Down but not out, humans have devised a plan to retake the surface. D.A.W.N. (the Defense Alliance Worldwide Network) has amassed some serious tech and resources, and they've launched an effort to combat the evil monster rager happening topside.

Four playable characters make up the team. Eiji Murasame, a cocky veteran who has fought the Nephilim for years, becomes the giant Aegis Prime. His partner is Jamila Senai, a young cadet who drives the mecha Tempest Galahad. Megadon is a captured Nephilim dragon with lava powers, and Ganira is an armored giant crab-type monster with water powers. She can summon a minion to be a punching bag or helper! Each is unique enough, but to limit it to these four with no unlockable characters is disappointing, especially considering the length of the game.

Toronto is where the team starts, and there are eight linear missions there. The first level is brilliant, teaching you the ropes while you gawk at the art style. You can pick up buildings and throw them at your enemies, and when those enemies get close to death, pressing the B Button will perform a fatality.

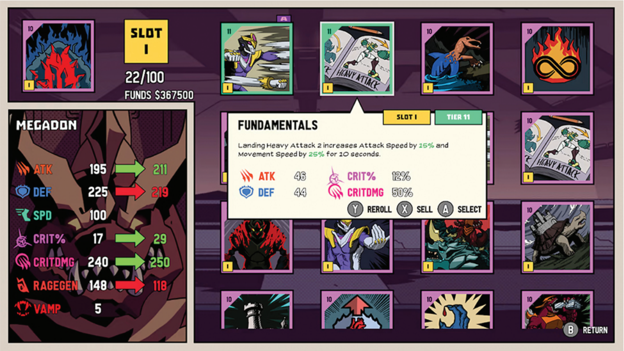
Each fatality is cool to see the first time, but as this move fills Rage and Health meters, you see it too often and it quickly becomes rote. New super moves called Rage Attacks roll out slowly, offering gameplay variety. These can turn the tide of battle and increase your score at the end of each section. The game grades you throughout each level, but it would have been less annoying to just receive a grade at the end.

After a couple of missions you get access to Cataclysm Attacks. They take a long time to build up, but the cinematic destruction that follows is worth the effort. When a new monster or enemy type appears, the game lets you experiment with how to defeat it one on one. It's sort of like a mini-boss, but then you see that monster more in later levels as regular punch fodder, so it's a nice ramp up in challenge. The game is generally easy and has little consequence for failure, other than loss of time to replay the level.

Still, there are always some rewards in the form of Augments regardless of grade. These tiles can be added in three different categories to each fighter, adding attack or defense increases, statuses like vampirism or trade-offs that show off the strategy of the game. Playing with all of these options can lead to better Augments and deeper gameplay, but it's all up to the player to experiment. Players can elect to sell them as well, spending cash in the shop on Health and Rage upgrades or palette swaps.

Eight missions before a change in scenery did feel like a slog to get

SWITCH PUBLISHER: WAYFORWARD DEVELOPERS: 13AM GAMES & WAYFORWARD RATING: T



through, and each location after Toronto honestly just felt like the first level over and over again. When the next location was revealed, the landscape did not differ enough to get me excited about it. It all blurred together far too soon – and the pacing of the action is generally slow to begin with.

The game attempts to make players feel the heft of each fighter by keeping movement slow and heavy. The action is there, but the pacing is off, and lining up large attacks was often difficult and frustrating. Adding another player helped with some of the pacing as players can mow down enemies faster, but it's limited to local co-op only.

Without unlocks or interesting locales, the game relies heavily on its story. The story is great! The developers have gone above and beyond to create believable lore, and the voice acting and writing really helps it all come together.

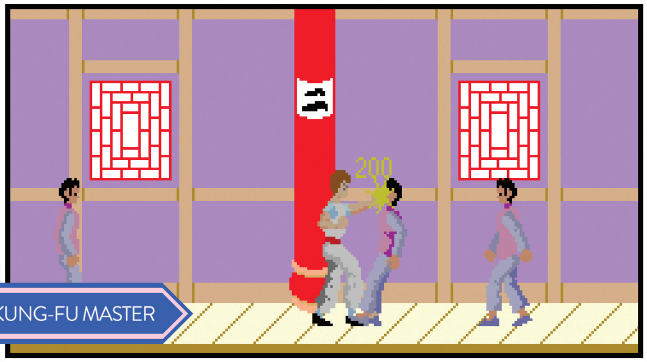
But if you're just here to knock monster heads around, you'll get bored quickly. $30 is too much to recommend this one, unless you're a really big fan of kaiju action and story, or you want to get really deep into the customization aspect. Without unlockables or much variety in gameplay, the game's initial punch of awesome fades quickly.

Still, this game could be just the start of something bigger. If Dawn of the Monsters turns out to be just the dawn of a new series, perhaps its sequels could build more on the foundation of this one's ruined cityscapes.
– BRETT

7.0

GO!

HOW BEAT-'EM-UPS KEEP MOVING FORWARD



KUNG-FU MASTER

BAD DUDES VS. DRAGONNINJA

THE STRICTLY TWO-DIMENSIONAL ORIGINS OF THE GENRE

BEAT-'EM-UPS BEGAN WITH Kung-Fu Master from Irem, a loose adaptation of a 1984 Jackie Chan film called, oddly, Wheels on Meals. And while technically that's true, though the game's philosophy comes directly from a more famous martials art movie: Bruce Lee's Game of Death. Fight a floor full of lackeys, beat their boss by capitalizing on their secret weakness, then climb to the next floor for more. That's Game of Death's final act, and Kung-Fu Master applied it to video games for the very first time. So, in a roundabout way, Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee worked together to help create an all-new video game genre.

Karateka, released in December of 1984, was similar on the surface, but it brought longer, more strategic fights to the table. The success of those two titles spawned hundreds of other movie-influenced games. Some of the more popular ones – like Trojan, Rastan and Rygar – took their cues from sword-fantasy films like Conan and Beastmaster.

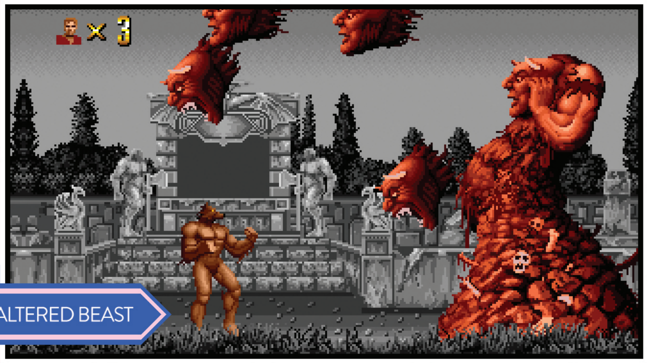
Weapon-based takes on the brawler genre would eventually evolve into exploratory action-RPGs like Faxanadu, Zelda II, Symphony of the Night and, more recently, Deedlit in Wonder Labyrinth (reviewed on Page 75). When it came to beat-'em-ups that stuck strictly to fisticuffs, the first big change was the addition of co-op. 1988's Bad Dudes Vs. DragonNinja added an additional playable character to the mix, as well as an additional plane of combat to go with it. Giving players the option to team up with a friend or go it alone on two floors at once did a lot to move the genre forward.

Still, by this time, the belt-scrolling beat-'em-up style pioneered by Renegade and Double Dragon (more on the next page) had already blown up. From the late '80s on out, the only reason to make a single-plane game with a punch-and-kick premise over one that used a Z-axis for depth would have been to conserve processing power and use it on more expressive, eye-catching graphics.

That's exactly what we got with Sega's Altered Beast in 1988. Unlike your average martial arts adventure, this one starred a couple of fighting fellows who were fresh out of the grave. They beat up a bunch of zombies and unexplainably two-headed wolves on their way to transforming into wolfmen, tigermen and even electric dragons, before taking on massive bosses made from eyeballs, decomposing bodies and other unsavory surprises.

It did much better than its more straight-laced contemporaries like Vigilante (Irem's spiritual sequel to Kung-Fu Master) and China Warrior (a shamelessly derivative "Brucesploitation" title from Hudson). Sega's yucky success then influenced the creation of Splatterhouse (Namco's gross-out horror series), Trio The Punch (an absurd comedy fighter that includes cameos from both Karnov and Colonel Sanders) and Mutation Nation (a truly surreal 1992 co-op brawler that sent two street toughs into battle alone against an army of hideously deformed mutant freaks).

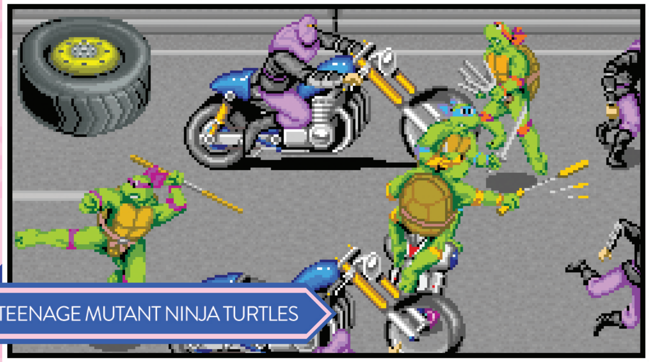
That's about as far as the original strictly 2D beat-'em-ups ever got, though their spirit continues to fight on! **– JONATHAN**



ALTERED BEAST

SPLATTERHOUSE

RENEGADE


TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

THE BEGINNINGS OF BELT-ACTION BRAWLING

THE ORIGIN OF belt-action brawlers – as they're known today – can be traced back to Renegade from Technos. Birthing the immensely popular Kunio-kun series, the game's innovation was essentially adding more freedom of movement through the Z-axis. Once it was seen how popular the game was – and how many quarters were being flung at it – it gained traction and many studios would copy the style to create what is now known as the golden age of the brawler. Adding a second player in Technos' infamous follow-up title Double Dragon meant more players and more quarters. Once Konami applied the formula to the popular Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles license, the ball really got moving with four players on-screen tackling the Foot Clan!

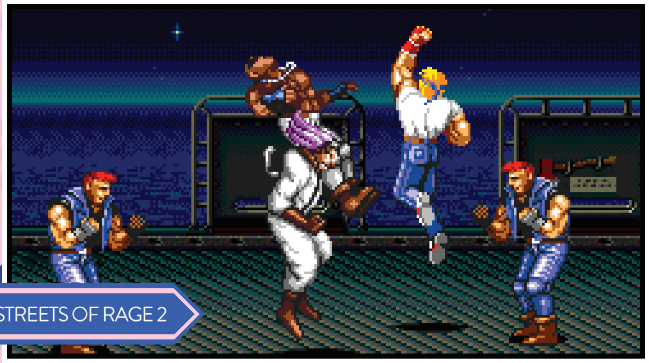
The next biggest move forward came from Capcom, through Final Fight. Final Fight was so graphically impressive at the time that it became the new standard. The characters were so much larger, sacrificing screen real estate for detail. The series also introduced the staple unblockable special move that cost life to utilize, and grabs, throws and Haggar's infamous piledriver helped tip the scales into an unforgettable experience that required skill – and plenty of quarters – to master. Once this masterpiece hit the scene, it seemed everyone had a signature brawler. Konami continued its reign of hard-hitting licenses, adding X-Men, TMNT: Turtles in Time and The Simpsons to its roster. Sega had Golden Axe and Alien Storm. This style of brawler was king of the arcade until Street Fighter II converted everyone to the fighting genre.

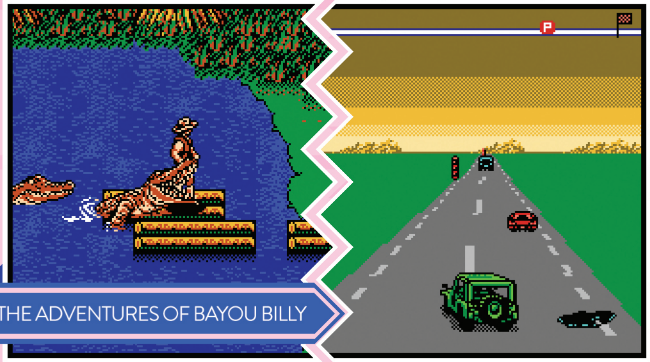
When that revolution was taking place, brawlers found a new home on 16-bit consoles. Sega scored a major hit with Streets of Rage, then again with Streets of Rage 2, which is considered the best among its original trilogy due to its amazing music, characters and setting. Sega's port game was strong, and several arcade titles like Golden Axe found new and extended life on consoles with sequels. Konami had success with titles like Batman Returns and its Turtles in Time port. Capcom ported many of its hits to these systems, though some, like Final Fight, had disappointing cuts to their content.

The game that seemed to turn it all on its head was Captain Commando from Capcom. While a good title, reviewers at the time brought to light how stale the brawler formula had become. The other issue was an abundance of lackluster sequels. Most titles relied more on a setting or license to differentiate themselves, but they lacked the innovation necessary to keep things going strong. With quarters and ports focusing on fighters and console gamers wanting deeper experiences in RPGs, the mindless beat-'em-up became less lucrative.

This era produced some of the best co-op games of their time, and many older gamers have core memories attached to defeating the big bads of these games amongst friends – or even strangers! Early belt-action brawlers are still staples found in most arcades, and they still have the power to evoke nostalgia of halcyon days spent hoarding enough quarters to survive the onslaught of redundant gang members and muscle-bound monsters. **– BRETT**

FINAL FIGHT


STREETS OF RAGE 2


THE ADVENTURES OF BAYOU BILLY

RIVER CITY RANSOM

GAMES THAT MIXED BRAWLING WITH OTHER GENRES

THE VERY QUALITIES that make beat-'em-ups easy to jump into are also why the genre has long been criticized as repetitious and formulaic. You can only punch and kick back-alley thugs in so many ways before the practice grows wearisome, after all. Many developers in those early brawler years understood this truth, thus they began experimenting with gameplay style mash-ups in pursuit of a chicken-and-waffles combo that would make anyone salivate.

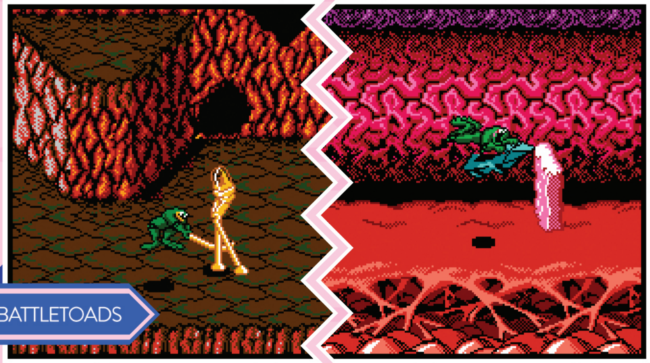
Konami was one of the first to emerge from the test kitchen, serving up The Adventures of Bayou Billy in 1989. This was no mere saunter through an 8-bit New Orleans, but a carousel of pain that cycled through standard brawling, NES Zapper-compatible rail shooting and battle racing segments. While the variety certainly kept players on their toes, the execution was too disjointed and demanding to be truly enjoyable. Compare Bayou Billy to Sega's Alien Storm, released in arcades in 1990 and the following year on Genesis – it featured a somewhat similar marriage of brawling, rail shooting and horizontal shoot-'em-up action, only presented in a more organic (and less maddeningly difficult) package.

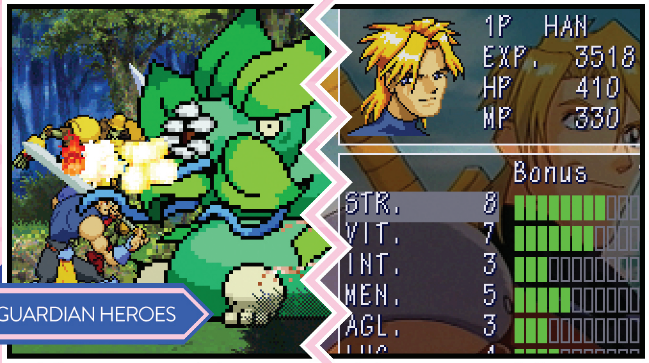
The genre kings at Technos wasted no time cooking up plate after plate of fisticuff fusions spun off their arcade smash Renegade. The result was a slew of sports titles featuring the likes of dodgeball, soccer and hockey infused with combat mechanics for a more physical, less friendly take on high school athletics. Of course, the company's biggest success was 1990's River City Ransom, an open-world fighting paradise with a surprisingly deep RPG growth system. Though not a huge success during its NES stint, it would wind up influencing the beat-'em-up resurgence decades later.

Speaking of role-play mechanics, Capcom converted Dungeons & Dragons into a pair of arcade belt-scrollers in the early '90s. The blend shouldn't have worked, yet the D&D duology surprised everyone with how well its various RPG elements were adapted. You selected a character class, leveled up by acquiring experience points, hunted for loot, equipped gear and even navigated branching story paths. Other studios would later expand upon Capcom's foundation, such as Treasure and its 1996 cult classic Guardian Heroes, a Sega Saturn exclusive free of the arcade ecosystem's constraints.

But if any one game could be considered the poster child for brawler hybrids, it would be 1991's Battletoads on NES. Rare's attempt to capitalize on Ninja Turtle hysteria carved its own identity as a genre party medley, masquerading as a simple beat-'em-up in the first level before shifting gears into subterranean rappelling, then obstacle racing, then twitch platforming and so on. While its unbalanced difficulty put even Bayou Billy to shame, Battletoads' creative mockery of cohesion was tantalizing enough to birth an entire franchise.

All the flavor enhancements weren't enough to reverse growing disinterest in the brawler genre as the '90s came to a close, however. Players were hungry for polygons – thus menus had to change to accommodate their evolving tastes. **– TONY**


BATTLETOADS



GUARDIAN HEROES

CASTLE CRASHERS

SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD: THE GAME

THE CRITICAL REVIVAL IN THE LATE '00S & EARLY '10S

ONE OF THE the harsh realities of game creation is how, as average budgets rise, priority is placed on chasing modern trends to guarantee a return on investment. Most studios had embraced the third dimension by the turn of the millennium, leaving crumbs for anyone who longed for the pixelated worlds of the 8- and 16-bit eras. Traditional beat-'em-ups were largely a casualty during this transition.

Two innovations during the 2000s opened the door for brawlers and other genres to chart a comeback: digital distribution and unified online services. The former encouraged small groups with meager budgets to avoid scrambling for limited retail shelf space and instead serve audiences directly. Meanwhile, more seamless online capabilities became a blessing for players who longed to game alongside friends who rarely met in person. Sure, PCs may have enjoyed these benefits well before home consoles, but it was the arrival of Xbox Live Arcade, PlayStation Network and WiiWare that welcomed the wider market to the future.

Taking an early initiative was The Behemoth, an offshoot of Flash animation portal Newgrounds with a penchant for old-school arcade experiences. The team stormed XBLA in 2008 with Castle Crashers, a medieval-themed action-RPG hack-and-slash that became a smash hit and led to ports to additional machines down the road, including the Switch in 2019. Castle Crashers drew obvious inspiration from classics like Golden Axe and Double Dragon, but it was the eternal muse River City Ransom that served as the backbone.

The Technos trailblazer also lit a fire under Ubisoft, which partnered with comic creator Bryan Lee O'Malley to deliver Scott Pilgrim vs. the World: The Game in 2010. (The original comic already incorporated elements from RCR, so the translation to co-op belt-scroller couldn't have been smoother!) It became a second pillar of the brawler revival, which is why fans were so disappointed when the game was delisted in 2014. Thankfully, this crime was absolved when the game returned in 2021 on literally every available platform!

By now, the train was in motion and everyone wanted to get on board. WayForward hit us with 2012's Double Dragon Neon, a follow-up to the original trilogy infused with '80s cheese. Drinkbox Studios then charted new territory in 2013's Guacamelee!, a Metroidvania with a rich combat system inspired by Mexican wrestling. And we can't neglect Vanillaware's Dragon's Crown, a 2013 spiritual successor of sorts to Capcom's Dungeons & Dragons: Tower of Doom – which Vanillaware director George Kamitani had previously helped develop.

However, the most notable rep of this new beat-'em-up age came in 2005. South Korean studio Neople threw together an MMO brawler called Dungeon & Fighter in roughly five months, not thinking it would have any serious staying power. But it did! It then ventured into new markets, eventually landing in North America in 2010 under the title Dungeon Fighter Online. As of last year, its player count has exceeded 850,000,000, making it the third most-played game on Earth, ahead of heavy-hitters like Fortnite, Among Us and even Minecraft! **– TONY**

DOUBLE DRAGON NEON

DUNGEON FIGHTER ONLINE

GOD OF WAR

VIEWTIFUL JOE

INSPIRING THE CHARACTER ACTION GENRE

WHAT IF WE gave the spectacle and brutality of beat-'em-ups a little more . . . kick? As these types of games are rooted in simplicity, developers of the '00s wanted to merge the arcade-y appeal with unlockable abilities and complicated strings of attacks. Enter the "character action" genre, a slightly clunky term for action-adventures centered around elaborate movesets and crazy combos. As it turns out, these types of games have largely struck gold, satisfying players who are looking for something splashy but with a little more meat, and introducing the world to many of gaming's latest superstars.

The PlayStation 2's Devil May Cry is one of the earliest examples of a character action game, dressing up an old favorite gameplay type with depth befitting a fighter. Production values were noticeably higher than in the past, with cinematic cutscenes, numerous unlockables and state-of-the-art 3D visuals and animations, all of which have become synonymous with this subgenre.

Ninja Gaiden on the Xbox followed soon after. While it stayed true to the original NES trilogy's trademark difficulty and anime-inspired cutscenes, it also differed from its roots by being more combo-heavy and aggressively bloody.

And speaking of violence, Sony hit back with God of War, a critically acclaimed slaughter through Greek mythology featuring Ares' protégé Kratos. The series has become synonymous with Sony, and it's now one of the PlayStation brand's most successful franchises from both a critical and commercial standpoint.

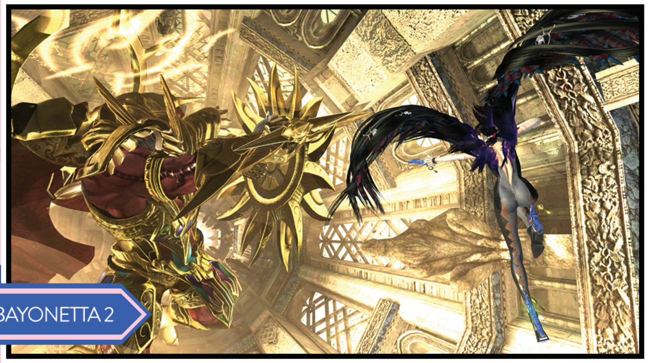
But a few years later, the genre took a step away from brooding antiheroes and more toward over-the-top theatrics and cheeky innuendo. The wild, playfully stylish No More Heroes series got its start on the Wii and most recently debuted two different follow-ups on the Switch. And Bayonetta made an even bigger splash! For a series that began on Xbox 360 and PS3, the Umbra Witch quickly became associated with Nintendo when the Big N decided to publish the sequel. And due to the popularity of both games, Bayonetta herself became such a big star in her own right that she was voted into Super Smash Bros.!

Even when they slip under the radar, such as Capcom's God Hand, a lot of these games can find a dedicated audience that loves the larger-than-life characters and skill-driven gameplay. And thanks to modern production values and the focus on longer, beefier campaigns, these types of games still remain popular today.

While these games are almost always presented in a dynamic third-person perspective, my personal favorite keeps the action on a purely 2D plane: Viewtiful Joe! This Capcom cult classic kicked off on the GameCube before being ported to the PS2, and brought with it a fantastic blend of straightforward action and hidden depth.

And ultimately, that's the appeal of character action games: When they click, they're able to have their cakes and *beat* them too, with both immediately accessible destruction and long-term mastery.

— MATTHEW T.



BAYONETTA 2

NO MORE HEROES III

DYNASTY WARRIORS 2

HYRULE WARRIORS

INSPIRING THE WARRIORS/MUSOU GENRE

AFTER HAVING BAYONETTA summon demonic high heels to stomp out trouble while spinning wildly on her back blasting a group of foes with her feet-guns . . . have you ever thought to yourself, "Yeah, this is pretty fun. But it's just too subtle."? Sure, laying waste to *dozens* of characters per mission in over-the-top ways is all well and good, but why not *hundreds?* Or *thousands!?* Do you crave a protagonist who isn't just an acrobatic superhero, but a literal one-man army? Then have I got the games for you!

The Musou genre has its roots in Koei Tecmo and Omega Force's Dynasty Warriors, although the very first game in that series was a traditional fighter. It wasn't until the game localized as Dynasty Warriors 2 (aka Shin Sangokumusou) came around that players got their first taste of large-scale crowd control in a third-person action game. If the traditional beat-'em-up is a power fantasy, then Musou brings that appeal to its logical extreme, with completely inept waves of sword fodder constantly approaching and heroes who can fell scores of them with a single attack.

There's certainly a visceral satisfaction in all that, but surely this style of gameplay can't engage the player for terribly long without some challenge level. To address this concern, Musous often task players with something else beyond the moment-to-moment combat: battlefield management. See, it's not just one hero out there – it's a fighter leading their own waves of sword fodder, and your troops need bases! Capturing keeps is often a straightforward task of conquering enough enemies (and a slightly tougher miniboss) within designated areas, and taking them is beneficial to everyone, from making more soldiers to raising the troops' morale (power). As such, while there's still plenty of classic brawler action, there's a much larger focus on where and when exactly to beat 'em up. Despite their reputation for being very much button-mashers, there's a level of thoughtfulness and improvisation that is unique to Musous and part of the reason they've persisted this long.

In fact, they've gotten so popular that Nintendo has already teamed up with Koei Tecmo four times (and counting) to bring two of their biggest series onto the battlefield! In 2014, Hyrule Warriors landed on the Wii U. The spinoff allowed players to finally test their mettle as over two dozen classic Zelda characters, from all-stars such as Link, Zelda and Ganondorf to cult favorites like Ghirahim and Marin. Between the beefy Story Mode and sprawling Adventure Mode, there was more Musou action here than you could shake a Deku Stick at. It later got two even more packed ports, and in 2020, a full sequel called Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity, which put more emphasis on combat and its "what if" story, and less on capturing keeps.

Those are far from the only Switch Warriors games, though, as Fire Emblem Warriors hit in 2017, and its Three Houses-specific sequel Fire Emblem Warriors: Three Hopes has just hit store shelves! If that's not enough, there's Dynasty Warriors 8, Warriors Orochi 4, One Piece Pirate Warriors 3 & 4 and Persona 5 Strikers. Whew! **— MATTHEW T.**

PERSONA 5 STRIKERS

FIRE EMBLEM WARRIORS: THREE HOPES

STREETS OF RAGE 4

RIVER CITY GIRLS

THE MODERN REVIVAL OF RETRO-HONORING BRAWLERS

ONCE THE DESIGN of the brawler didn't rely on keeping players pumping quarters into machines, developers could explore deeper gameplay, new elements and expanded technology. It's easier to find partners through online servers, jumping in and out of gameplay is possible and genre merging is fueling innovation. Limitless design potential is also a huge plus, as older games had to constrict many things to fit all sorts of limitations. Adding roguelike elements, RPG elements or even platformer tricks has led many brawlers to stand out and gain acclaim. Exploration of narrative has also been imperative, as we're no longer standing in an arcade trying to finish a game before our parents say we have to leave!

For an easy example of the above, simply look at our review for Streets of Rage 4 back in Issue #47. It's an excellent example of how a modern look and sound can advance a retro series and gain notoriety, but it doesn't happen overnight. Dotemu, Lizardcube and Guard Crush all did their homework and collaborated perfectly to design and hone the brawler experience for a new generation, while keeping longtime fans of the genre cheering as well.

Flip back to Page 23 in this issue to read our Young Souls review, where a new but experienced team is tackling the same design challenge by marrying brawling with RPG customization. The scenario is also fascinating and has a rich story. While the setting is wildly different, it's similar to how River City Ransom operated back in the day . . . which brings us to that series' modern revival: River City Girls.

By expanding the story and switching the traditional gender roles, a standout brawler found its foundation. Add in spectacular retro-modern graphics and a kickin' soundtrack and River City Girls has found an easy recipe for success.

Speaking of retro-modern, our review of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge ahead on Page 68 shows the effort of taking the look and feel from the 1987-era Turtles cartoon and games and bringing it back for today, while exciting fans by simply applying fanservice to a well-established license and gameplay formula.

Unlockables, collectables, replay value, New Game+ modes and other elements purloined from other genres are things that help retain attention span through what can still be a repetitive experience. Repetitiveness, while a genre staple, can be softened by encountering new enemies, locales or finding new gear. Many brawlers have also turned to health regeneration, upgrading characters or adding screen-clearing moves to keep the fun flowing. Balance is also key, as most current brawlers are far less punishing than their retro forefathers, but are still challenging and rewarding.

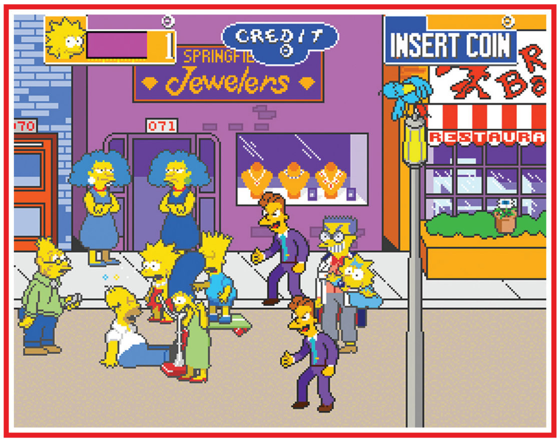
All of these titles have been received well, and more studios are being attracted to the genre by its ease of design and its ability to give players quick thrills that don't require AAA development. We'll continue to see the genre's limitations addressed in interesting ways, and I can't wait to see what the brilliant minds of the industry have planned for this new age! — **BRETT**

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: SHREDDER'S REVENGE

RIVER CITY GIRLS 2

TOP TEN
MOST WANTED BEAT-'EM-UP SWITCH PORTS

The Nintendo Switch is already home to dozens of incredible examples of the brawler genre . . . but what can we say? We're insatiable! We want even more ways to pound punks into the pavement on Nintendo's newest system. So here are our 10 top picks for games that aren't yet available on the Switch, but should be! (Hopefully a few of these will become realities!)

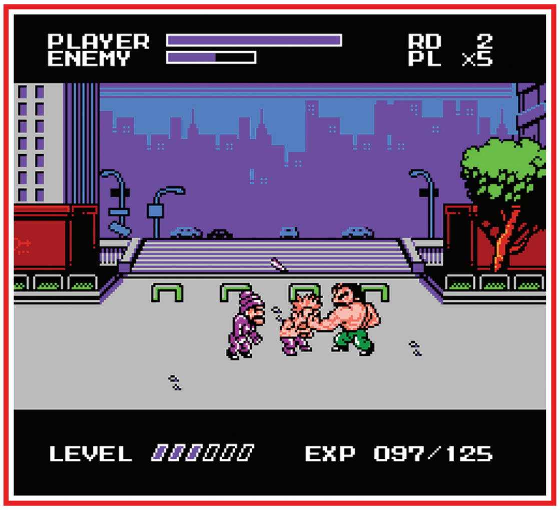


THE MEAN STREETS OF SPRINGFIELD

THE SIMPSONS

THE FIRST THING I search for when stepping inside any arcade is the Simpsons arcade game. I was thrilled when they ported it to PS3 and Xbox 360, but now those versions are locked to those systems with no way to purchase them. Then Arcade1Up just released a dedicated home machine, but it's spendy. And who's still playing the Commodore 64 or DOS ports?!

With the resurgence of the brawler genre and the call for everything to be on Switch, it seems like a perfect time for this game to hit the eShop. Who wouldn't want to storm Springfield with a vacuum and smack carnival balloons, mad bowling balls and literal bears? It was such an outlandish game for the characters, but it worked because the controls were tight and the humor was on point. I especially liked playing with multiple people so the family members could team up and do special moves. A Switch port would need online play so friends could play together – I'd love to jump in, beat up some jaundiced ruffians with some buddies, save a baby and run my own episode of "Who Killed Mr. Burns?"! Port it now or I'll have a cow, man! **– BRETT**



A DEMAKE THAT DESERVES A REMAKE!

MIGHTY FINAL FIGHT

THERE'S SOMETHING SO memorably incongruous about the final few years of the NES life cycle – the span of time after the SNES had already been introduced, but before 8-bit game development had ended completely. That's the era when Mighty Final Fight appeared. Capcom's nearly perfect port of Final Fight from the arcade to the SNES (mainly just missing Guy as a playable character) had shipped in 1991, but two years later Capcom decided they needed to go backward and also give the NES a very late port of its own. Because the 8-bit hardware couldn't handle big character sprites like the SNES could, the developers made the call to chibi-fy everyone and make the clash against the Mad Gear Gang a whole lot cuter! Maybe they were inspired by River City Ransom? In any event, the result was wonderfully unique . . . and sadly a one-off, as no other Mighty Final Fights were ever made. This style should come back, or at the very least this NES game should come to NSO! **– LUCAS**

HOLD YOUR HALF-HORSES

GOLDEN AXE: THE REVENGE OF DEATH ADDER

YOU MAY THINK you've played the sequel to Golden Axe, whether it be Golden Axe II or III on the Wii Virtual Console or the more recent Sega Genesis Classics collection on Nintendo Switch. But have you *really* played the *true* sequel to Golden Axe?

OK, maybe "true" undermines the aforementioned Genesis titles, but Golden Axe started in arcades, and it's in arcades where a sequel arrived that has never been ported to any home console. It's Golden Axe: The Revenge of Death Adder! In this System 32-powered sequel, a new generation of heroes is called upon to take up arms against the returning big bad of Yuria, with only one of the original heroes returning – and even he must ride atop a giant named Goah to get around now.

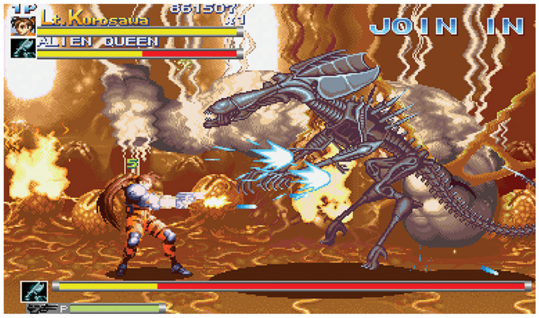
Before Golden Axe III introduced multiple paths, GARDA did it first. With huge characters, gorgeous graphics, 3D segments and improved gameplay, we can only wonder why this showpiece never came home in the '90s. Recently, it *has* come home, thanks to the Astro City Mini and Arcade1Up miniature arcade cabinets, but the size and cost of those units means a Switch port would still be highly desirable! **– DAVID**

"WELCOME TO DIE!"
X-MEN

ARRIVING IN ARCADES after both TMNT games and The Simpsons, X-Men had a lot to live up to – but it absolutely lived up to Konami's beat-'em-up reputation. Combat was visceral, with ear-splitting effects punctuating every attack. Each one of the six playable characters felt distinct, with unique "mutant power" moves and a variety of combos at their disposal, and there were no "bad" characters. Everyone was great! It also looked and sounded absolutely incredible, with tons of memorable voice acting and at least one song composed of a guy repeatedly yelling "X." A standard four-player version existed, but the real fun came if you happened upon the enormous double-screened six-player version of the game, which stood as a massive cabinet capable of delivering what is simply one of the greatest arcade-going experiences ever conceived. And that's where X-Men was at its best: with six players beating up robots and lizards together in the same place. With modern displays able to replicate the widescreen setup and the Switch's Joy-Cons so plentiful in homes everywhere, there's never been a better time to get Marvel's Merry Mutants onto a Nintendo platform. **– KRIS**

"AVENGERS, ASSEMBLE!"
CAPTAIN AMERICA AND THE AVENGERS

BACK IN THE early '90s, the X-Men were Marvel's headlining heroes (thanks in large part to their wildly popular Saturday morning cartoon show on Fox), while other Marvel Comics heroes like The Avengers were the second-stringers. Three decades later, those roles have long been reversed, as characters like Iron Man, Captain America, Hawkeye and The Vision have all risen to pop culture prominence through their many appearances in Marvel Cinematic Universe movies and TV shows, while the X-Men have largely been swept under a rug for the past 10 years or so. So while it'd be great to have an X-Men Arcade Game port to Switch, maybe porting Captain America and The Avengers would be a bit more timely? This coin-op counterpart to Konami's massive X-Men cabinet supported just the standard four players at maximum, and with action crafted by Data East, its gameplay wasn't quite as flashy and exciting. Its more limited scope ultimately helped extend its reach, though, as it wasn't too difficult to port to the home consoles of the day! If it made it to SNES and Genesis 30 years ago, it can hit Switch now, right? **– LUCAS**



"GET TO THE CHOPPA!"
ALIEN VS. PREDATOR

COLORFUL. ENERGETIC. FUN. Those aren't the words most would use to describe the Alien vs. Predator brand, but in 1994, things were very different. It was a time before the two lethal icons had ever met in the movies. The only places they'd ever squared off were in comic books, video games and the hands of children holding their respective action figures! Against all odds, many R-rated horror franchises had become super popular with kids around that time, and Capcom aimed to make the most of that trend. Their strategy? Take the cartoonish-but-cool co-op violence they pioneered with Final Fight and apply it to a four-player arcade brawler starring the two titular titans of terror.

Mysterious forces lead to an Alien outbreak that takes over the unsuspecting city of San Drad, California, in less than 72 hours. The only known survivors are Dutch Schafer (the man Arnold Schwarzenegger plays in the first Predator movie), now outfitted with a giant mechanical arm, and an original character named Linn Kurosawa. Just as the two are about to be overrun by an Alien horde, they're joined by a pair of Predators: a Hunter and Warrior, each with their own unique weapons and attacks. What follows is one of the most well-animated, thrilling beat-'em-ups ever, complete with surprise plot twists, special moves, massive combos and even a scare or two. Now that Disney owns both the Predator and Alien licenses, let's hope they strike a deal with Capcom to bring back this classic cross-company collaboration! **– JONATHAN**

SATURDAY MORNING SPECTACLE
CADILLACS & DINOSAURS

ONCE I FOUND out there was a video game called "Cadillacs & Dinosaurs," my interest was piqued. Turns out it's based on a comic that got turned into a cartoon in 1993, the same year the game was released. The plot is even more convoluted than you might expect: Set in 2513 with factions of humans representing different ideals and locales, Cadillacs roam the streets and dinosaurs roam the Earth. The show is . . . hard to watch, and only got one season, but Capcom's game is fun to play.

Three players can choose between Jack Tenrec, Hannah Dundee, Mustapha Cairo and Mess O'Bradovich (who names these people?!). The bad guys are the Black Marketeers, a gang that is hunting dinosaurs for nefarious purposes. Turns out a mad doctor is merging humans and dinosaurs into mutants, and this affront to nature must be stopped!

This brawler is more violent and graphic than most other brawlers, allowing players and enemies to use all manner of weapons like knives and guns. The titular dinosaurs are seen several times, and if they come into play they are indiscriminate when chomping at anyone on the screen. The souped-up Cadillac is featured in a level in the desert where you get to mow down the waves of baddies with your bumper. Good cathartic fun, followed by a ridiculous motorcycle boss fight!

So I'm all for punching velociraptors, thwarting mad scientists and burning rubber. It's never been ported, so get on it, Capcom! And add in some online. And maybe a playable dino? **– BRETT**

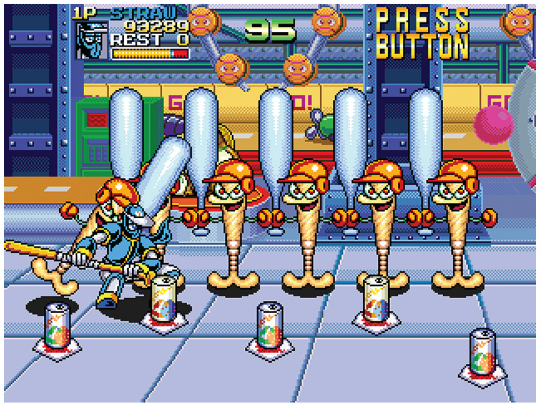
HIT BY A SMOOTH CRIMINAL

MICHAEL JACKSON'S MOONWALKER

MICHAEL JACKSON, the original "Bad" dude, really knew how to beat it, but did you know he could also beat 'em up? Back in 1990, he and Sega threw their hats into the brawler genre with an arcade adaptation of Moonwalker, Michael's film from 1988. It was a movie that made even less sense than most games of the time, featuring the gloved one transforming into a kaiju-sized robot and battling a spider-loving Joe Pesci for the freedom of random children. The game has all that and more, including a Thriller-inspired zombie level and power-up support from Bubbles, Jackson's real-life pet chimp.

Played from a 3/4 top-down perspective, up to three Michaels (!?) brutalize a bevy of short men in baggy suits, strangers in motorcycle helmets and a wide range of robots. Instead of punching and kicking, the Jackson Three zap enemies with bursts of electricity. Shocking! And, of course, Michael, Michael and Michael really know how to dance, with moves so smooth that their enemies literally explode with excitement.

Moonwalker is shallow and only 20 minutes long, but what it lacks in quality and quantity it makes up for in quirkiness! **— JONATHAN**



NO, NOT THAT BATMAN

NINJA BASEBALL BAT MAN

SOME BRAWLERS ARE based on popular TV shows and movies. Others draw inspiration from sci-fi and fantasy. A few are even born after a night of binging on Halloween candy, jalapeño poppers and Monster Energy drinks! However, no premise is as out of left field as that of Irem's Ninja Baseball Bat Man. Released in 1993, this arcade diamond placed players in the cleats of a baseball-themed sentai squad as they tore their way through waves of living gloves, balls and a cavalcade of thrift store chimeras. It's impossible not to become an instant fan after catching a glimpse of the chromatic chaos – so then why have we only just recently become aware of this masterpiece?

Reportedly, less than 50 cabinets were distributed across North America, meaning audiences were never given a forkball's chance to have their hearts (and bases) stolen. If not for the rise of arcade emulation, Ninja Baseball Bat Man would likely have remained in the bullpen, never to be called to the pitcher's mound. If Hamster Corporation has been willing to port such bush league Irem titles as Kid Niki and Vigilante to the Switch eShop, they could spare a fraction of that magnanimity to draft a true Hall of Famer to the Arcade Archives! **— TONY**

UNLEASH YOUR ANIMAL MIGHT!

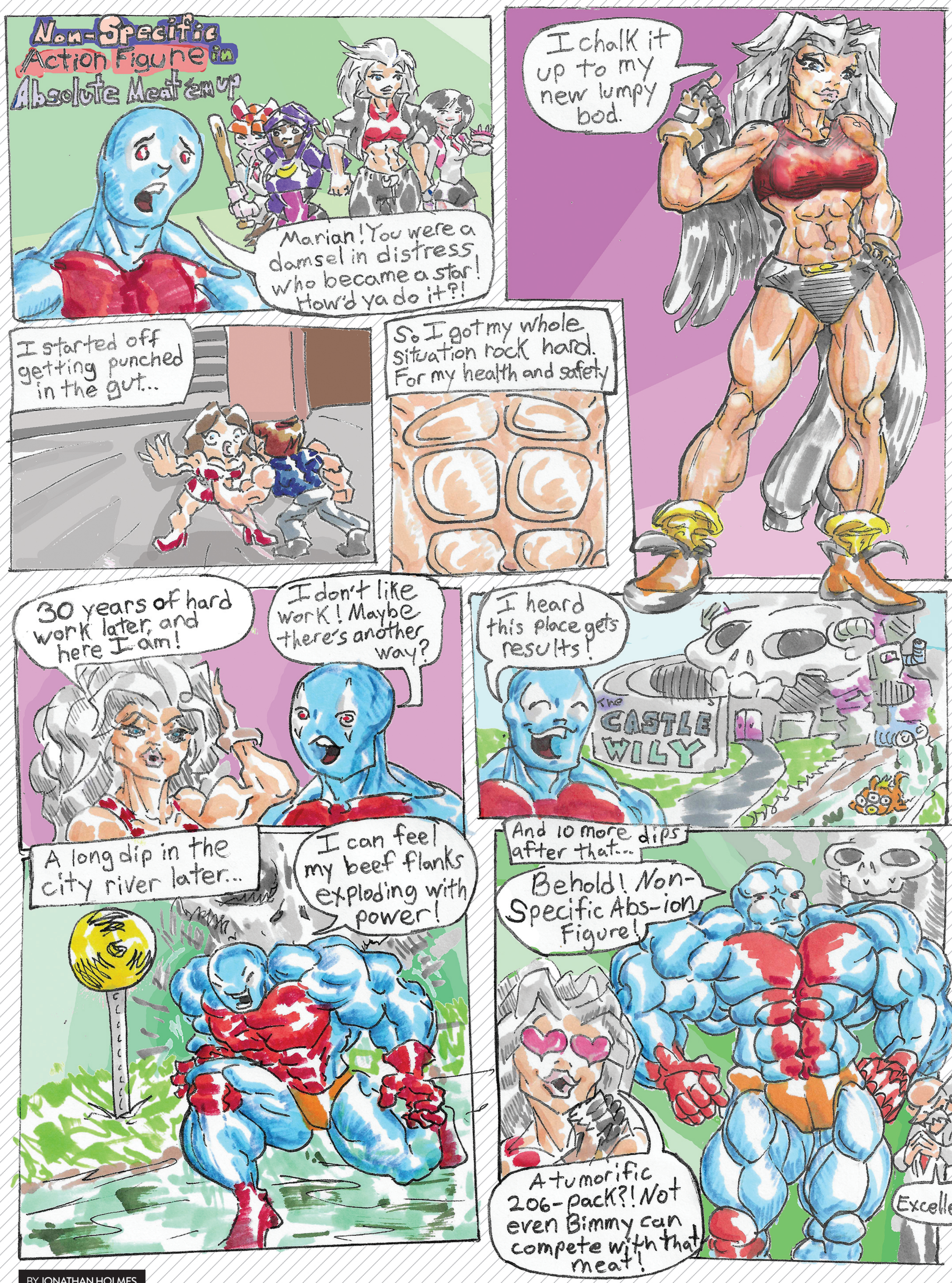
METAMORPHIC FORCE

HAD YOUR FILL of Ninja Turtles, but you still want to see manimals slug each other? Well you're in luck, because Metamorphic Force exists! And you're also not in luck because it's not on the Switch!

It's that age-old tale: The villain Death Shadow wants to rule the world, so naturally the goddess Athena grants four guys the power to become werebeasts. How do they accomplish this? Why, by snagging power-ups dropped by a bizarre aye-aye man carrying a magic bag, of course! The heroes' animal forms are equipped with extra power and new attacks, but you'd better keep moving before you're forced to revert back to being a plain old human. Fortunately it's easy to keep the hits coming, and barreling through a legion of anthropomorphic elephants with disproportionately huge heads before kicking a giant robot man in his mecha-brain has never been this much fun!

This brawler is brimming with that '90s animation charm. The locations look like they were ripped straight from a Saturday morning show, and the bosses even deliver one-liners before battle. It's a shame that Konami never did anything more with the concept! **— LINDSEY**

Those are just 10 of our selections for classics of the beat-'em-up genre we'd love to see on Switch, and it seems likely that we may get one or more of these wishes granted. After all, when would be a better time to bring these brawlers back than in the wake of the success of great new releases like River City Girls 2 and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge?



BY JONATHAN HOLMES

RIVER CITY GIRLS 2

It's time for another girls' night out on the mean streets of River City!

ALL'S WELL THAT ends well, right? Sure, Misako and Kyoko might have rampaged across the whole expanse of River City punching everyone they met in the face on a crazed quest to rescue their "kidnapped" boyfriends during the first River City Girls game, but that all worked out OK, didn't it?

Yeah . . . not exactly.

When we last left our leading ladies with the credits rolling on their successful rescue mission, they were walking off into the sunset arm-in-arm with Kunio and Riki, finally reunited and feeling great about themselves. The problem is, they left a massive path of destruction in their wake to get to that point – a path that culminated in a final battle against a yakuza boss' daughter, Sabuko, in a penthouse suite overlooking the city. She was subdued by these two wild high school girls, and when her father, Sabu, gets home and sees what happened while he was away . . . well, let's just say it doesn't pay to make the head of a yakuza clan angry. River City Girls 2 picks up the story right where the last game ended, and that's bad news for our heroes: Sabu's going to be gunning for the girls, and all of River City's going to get caught in the crossfire.

CITY UNDER SIEGE

River City, as a setting, has always been so critical to this series over the decades that it's almost been a living, breathing character itself, and in River City Girls 2 its role is going to grow even greater.

For starters, it's simply going to be growing in size. Take the total number of locations and explorable spaces from the first River City Girls and multiply that by a factor of three, and you'll land about where this new sequel will be bringing us!

The developers are promising a larger game world this time, packed with all kinds of secrets, and new environments ranging from an enchanted forest to a Silicon Valley-inspired tech company. And apparently a natural history museum with a big dinosaur display? (It's frowned upon to climb on top of a tyrannosaurus in the real world, but in River City, you can feel free to hop right on.)

The wider range of places to visit will reinforce the story this time around – because many of those places will be what you're fighting to save!

There are no lost boyfriends to look for and fight to rescue in this sequel, so Misako, Kyoko, Kunio and Riki will instead be fighting to reclaim all their favorite hangout spots!

Imagine trying to bring a date to your favorite burger joint or ice cream parlor, only to find once you got there that the place has been overrun by punks. You'd have to step up and do what any hot-blooded teenager would do, of course, and beat them senseless until they flee the scene and leave you to order your food in peace!

Battling to push back invading gangs from certain sections of the city takes my mind all the way back to the first River City Ransom. Remember when you'd enter a new area, and the bar at the bottom of the screen would briefly display a warning that you'd entered "The GENERIC DUDES' Turf!" or "The JOCKS' Turf!"? Well, maybe it's time for our heroes to finally establish some turf of their own!

YOU'LL NEED A HEADQUARTERS

Waging an all-out turf war across River City demands a military approach to your tactics, and as such one of the most important things you'll do in River City Girls 2 is create bases of operations called Hideouts. These safehouses serve multiple purposes.

First, they'll function as a respawn point if you get yourself curbstomped out in the streets. Like a checkpoint, you'll always have the option to return to a Hideout – at no cost – if you fall in battle. (If you don't mind paying up, though, you'll also be able to respawn directly where you lost to try again.)

Your Hideouts will also hold critical storage chests where you can offload any items you've collected in your travels, to keep them safe for when you need them next. (And using video game magic, all storage chests in all Hideouts will be linked, so you can drop off an item in one and pull it back out of the box in another.)

With Hideouts serving as your military headquarters, though, their most important function is that they'll be where you keep all your extra soldiers!

BE CUTE! RECRUIT!

One of the most fun features in the first River City Girls was the ability to recruit your foes to fight on your side. Every once in a while, after you'd clear out a room of all but one last enemy, that final foe would fall on their knees and beg for mercy. You could then choose to spare them – and if you did, they'd join up with you in gratitude. From then on you could summon them to appear out of nowhere and offer some assistance when you found yourself in the middle of further fights that were a little too much to deal with alone.

Recruiting returns in RCG2, but now you'll be able to have two of these call-in allies available to be summoned at any given time. All of the foes you've captured will chill out in the Hideouts – sitting the bench saying "Put me in, coach!" – and you'll be able to pick and choose which tag team of two would be most helpful to tag along with you.

Want some even mightier muscle to rally to your cause? RCG2 is also going to introduce a higher tier of recruit character called hired henchmen!

Hired henchmen will function in the same way as recruits, in that they'll hide in the U.I. above your playable hero's health bar until you choose to call them into action. But when they appear in the scene, they'll unleash vastly more powerful attacks than the normal recruits ever could! The catch? You have to pay for the privilege of using them – they are called "hired" henchmen, after all!

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: WAYFORWARD RELEASE: LATE SUMMER 2022 RATING: E10+

THREE'S COMPANY

MEET THE ABOBO BROS!

The most iconic bad guy from the Double Dragon games, Abobo made an appearance as a boss in River City Girls. Now he's back – but he's not alone! Say hello to Mibobo (the green one) and Jack (who just stepped out of a Mr. T look-alike contest). Our heroes will be tasked to find all three of these fine fellows somewhere in the city, and they're all connected to the completion of a special side mission. Get the job done and you'll receive a special treat!

DEEPER CUTS

So, who exactly will these hireable henchmen be? WayForward's dev team hasn't wanted to reveal their identities in advance for fear of taking away the "Aha! I know that guy!" kind of moments players will experience naturally as they play, but it's safe to say that the ranks of these powerful summons will be populated by popular faces from the past. (We did get the scoop on Abobo's new brethren, so read about them to the right!)

I will give you another weird bit of information about the new big bad in this game, too: It's me! I'm the villain! *IT WAS LUCAS ALL ALONG!*

OK, so the bad guy is not literally NF Magazine Editor Lucas M. Thomas. But WayForward loves their obscure Kunio-kun trivia, so I'm pulling out one odd fact of my own! For almost all of his appearances over the years, the yakuza boss Sabu has kept his same name, even when localizations would rename Kunio and Riki and other main cast members. But the one time he did get a localized name was when the first Kunio-kun game, Nekketsu Kouha Kunio-kun, was released as Renegade on the Sega Master System. For that specific version, Sabu was named Lucas!

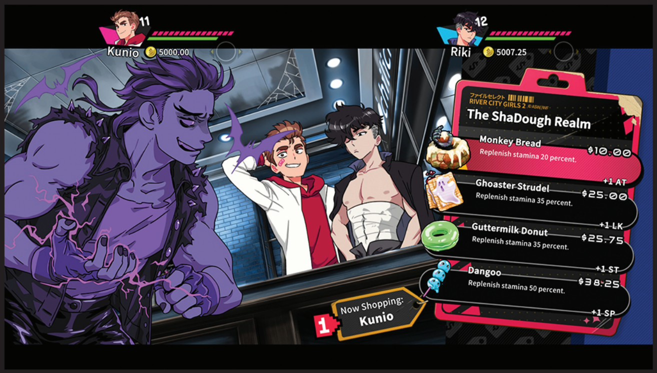
So quake in fear, minions! Mine is truly a name that inspires terror! I will be known as the NF Oyabun from now on!

NEW PLAYABLE HEROES

Because Lucas (excuse me, "Sabu") is so handsomely frightening, the double-dating duos of Misako & Kunio and Kyoko & Riki decide to link up with one more pair of fully playable pugilists: Marian, originally seen in the Double Dragon series, and Provie, who made her debut in 2017's River City Ransom: Underground. This happens early on in the adventure, we're assured. While neither of the new two are playable immediately on beginning this new game, WayForward told us that RCG2 players will encounter them both before much of the quest has gone by.

Once all six are assembled, you'll be able to freely swap between any of them by visiting Hideouts (of course), but you can also quick-swap to a different hero if you fall in battle while playing multiplayer. Every one of the six has her or his own moveset – and with how deep the technique list went in the original game, I can't wait to see how much more variety has been packed into this sequel.

Marian is planned to be the powerhouse of the bunch, towering over the rest in height and bringing fierce force to every punch. Provie, meanwhile, is an agile athlete, spinning her legs in wild whirlwinds with her self-made martial art based on breakdancing.



THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT

So River City is bigger than it's ever been before, you've got more heroes to switch between than ever before and you'll have multiple Hideouts to manage, along with who knows how many different recruits and henchmen picked up along the way. Sounds like our protagonists will be in need of a little organizational assistance.

Enter the smartphone! Both girls had these devices in the previous game, but they've now been upgraded with further functionality – all styled as different apps, of course!

First up is the GPS, which will offer guided directions to help players reach key locations. A godsend in this more complex composition of streets and buildings!

Then you'll discover Honkr, a social media platform that will allow NPCs to "Honk" at you to give you mission requests. It'll link straight up to the GPS, so when a character asks you to, say, pick them up a to-go order of spicy noodles, you'll be able to dash to the right restaurant's door.

The similarly named Snapr app will be your traveling art gallery, holding all the unlockable art you discover.

. . . And then there's Accessories.

ACCESSORIZE SUCCESS-ORIZE

Another returning feature made larger for this sequel will be the characters' ability to equip Accessories that can enhance their stats or skills. They were pretty low-key things in the previous game – you just picked to turn their effects on or off from a menu screen, and that was that. Now, though, Accessories will activate with new visual flourishes and have much more obvious impacts on the heroes.

The developers gave us a couple of examples, including the Vampire Teeth – equip it and your hero will slowly lose health, but they'll also be able to drain health away from the foes they fight! Or how about wearing the new Tuna Shirt? It'll buff your character's strength more and more for each hidden cat you find lurking in the city!

Many Accessories will also be tied to RCG2's new elemental damage system. There are four elemental effects you can inflict upon your opponents: Fire, which burns foes for extra damage and spreads to others they touch; Ice, which slows their movements temporarily; Shock, which can paralyze them in one place; and the video game classic, Poison, which of course slowly drains HP over time.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

If you're feeling at all intimidated and wondering whether you'd be able to juggle everything River City Girls 2 is bringing to the table, there's one more new location that should help: a dojo built specifically for training! You can step inside from almost the very start of the game, and there you'll find a helpful Tigerman who will let you just go to town with pummeling him into oblivion and back as much as you want. Practice all your moves. Unleash all your Accessories' effects. Sic all your henchmen after him – he won't mind! He likes it!

The training dojo will also be the place to perfect your combos, which are promised to be "pretty absurd" in this sequel. "Lots of moves now chain into each other, so you have a lot more creative freedom," say the devs. "Enemies that are KO'd are still fair game, so you can juggle their lifeless bodies around as long as you can keep comboing." Sounds like my kind of overkill!

MUSIC ON MY MIND

Before we wrap up, I want to offer some insight into the soundtrack! We got to ask a few questions to composer Megan McDuffee, including how she first approached making RCG1's music.

"From the outset, WayForward and I agreed that drawing inspiration from '80s music would be a great fit. Luckily that's one of my specialties! My work is often injected with '80s and '90s flavors. So when they approached me to basically just 'do me' for the soundtrack, it worked super well."

We also asked what was easier and harder about doing RCG2's music now.

"The fact that I already had a style palette to work from was quite nice; I wasn't starting to build a new sonic world from nothing. So that was the easier part. The hard part was not self-plagiarizing on accident, and keeping things fresh and interesting. I achieved this by pulling influences from a variety of different genres/artists, as well as using new production techniques. I've had time to further hone my skills since the first game, so I'm very excited to share this soundtrack!"

And I'm more than excited to hear it! The music will surely be the cherry on top of what is shaping up to be a truly sensational sequel. I think River City Girls 2 is about to smack us across the face with sheer quality! **– LUCAS**

CRISIS CORE -FINAL FANTASY VII- REUNION

Unexpectedly, Square Enix is bringing FFVII's prequel to the Switch!

TWO YEARS AGO, Square Enix hit role-playing fans with a Meteor Strike of a release: the long-awaited Final Fantasy VII Remake. That particular meteor didn't happen to make landfall on Nintendo soil, though. I still think Big N loyalists will get to play it eventually, but it hasn't happened yet!

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RELEASE: WINTER 2022 RATING: RP

Which is why I'm honestly shocked that Square Enix has just announced Crisis Core -Final Fantasy VII- Reunion is bound for the Switch this Winter. This is a new remaster of game that originally launched exclusively on the PlayStation Portable back in 2008. It serves as a prequel to the main FFVII story, following the adventures of a character named Zack Fair who fights in the service of SOLDIER.

It's unclear how much of a remaster this is, though. That's the term Square Enix is going with, but it looks more like a remake in my eyes, with how gorgeously its graphics have been upgraded over its original PSP edition. But then *that* has me skeptical about how it could be running on Switch too — are they going to pull the rug out from under us sometime later and show off downgraded visuals just for the Switch? Or will this game only be available on Switch as a dreaded Cloud Version?

I'll try to keep my optimism intact for the moment, because I'd personally like to play this (since I did stray from my Nintendo loyalty to play FFVII Remake on PS4 in 2020). Its flashy battles with active sword-swinging combat tap into a lot of what I loved about that game, too. So I'll look forward to this, cautiously! **— LUCAS**

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: THE COWABUNGA COLLECTION

Revisit the entirety of the Turtles' earliest video game era, all in one compilation!

THIS IS THE hardware generation during which we can claim publishers are finally doing retro game collections right. Long have we suffered ROM dumps of dubious quality, inadequate quality-of-life modifiers and a dearth of bonus features. Well, no more! Recent years have brought multi-region game selections, cut content added back in and even translations of titles that had previously never left Japan!

Now, Konami has partnered with Nickelodeon and the game preservation wizards at Digital Eclipse to present Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Cowabunga Collection, a package I'd thought we'd never see due to license entanglements. This dream platter serves up every Konami-published home console, handheld and arcade title based on the 1987 TMNT cartoon – and when I say "every," I do mean EVERY! We've got the three numbered TMNT chapters from NES, the three from Game Boy, all three unique versions of TMNT Tournament Fighters, Turtles in Time from SNES, The Hyperstone Heist from Genesis and of course both the legendary arcade brawlers. We'll also have the option to enjoy all their Japanese variants (excluding the NES version of Tournament Fighters, as it was never released there – and oddly the first arcade installment, which actually was).

We won't be limited to local co-op either, as four of the games are online-enabled: the two arcade games, The Hyperstone Heist and Tournament Fighters on SNES. Why those titles specifically? Obviously, the four-Turtle action of the arcade adventures would have the most appeal for group sessions, and since the arcade Turtles in Time has been modified for online play, it would be redundant to do the same for the SNES edition. Better to give its Genesis analogue a shot on the world stage. As for Tournament Fighters, the SNES version just looks the cleanest!

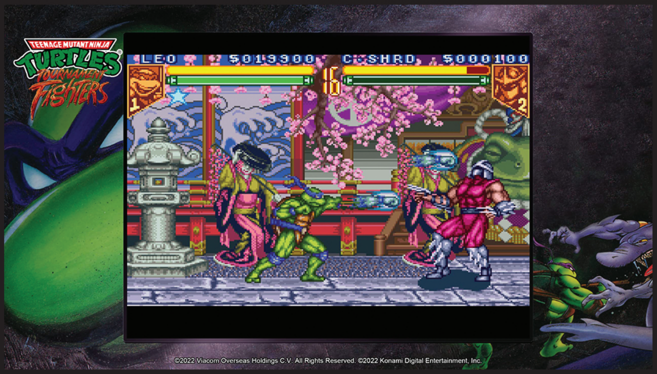
For Turtle Maniacs who grew up in the '80s while noshing on Pizza Hut and Domino's, this may be the most exciting throwback collection to ever be announced. Current TMNT media is no stranger to tapping the shellheads' inaugural animated outing to appeal to older fans, but the likelihood of games from that era making a return in such a bombastic fashion seemed out of the realm of possibility. (I mean, there was the re-release of the arcade original on Xbox Live Arcade that completely butchered the music, as well as the enhanced remake of Turtles in Time that left a sour taste in players' mouths, but we try to ignore those.)

But look at the deep cuts we're getting here! Tournament Fighters on NES, SNES and Genesis were famous for being wildly different from one another, with unique stories and even different lineups of combatants. (It'll finally be Hothead's time to shine!)

The title I'm most eager to experience for the first time, however, is Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles III: Radical Rescue on Game Boy. Rather than a belt-scroller or just a basic platformer, this was a full-on Metroidvania in which each Turtle possessed talents that would let them access areas that the others could not. Since I've been on something of a search action kick lately, that sounds right up my alley!

Are you ready to kick some shell when Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Cowabunga Collection drops on the Switch later this year? You best believe I am! **– TONY**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPERS: KONAMI & DIGITAL ECLIPSE RELEASE: TBA 2022 RATING: T



LEGO BRAWLS

Get ready to bash some bricks!

NOT EVERY GAME that uses the word "Brawl" in its name is actually a brawler. In fact, the most famous one wasn't! Super Smash Bros. Brawl was a platform fighter, not a brawler/beat-'em-up. (Though its single-player Subspace Emissary mode came close.)

With that confusing context established, it was hard to know what kind of game to expect to be attached to the name LEGO Brawls – but, sure enough, this is another non-brawler brawl that's using the name Brawls because it's trying to be like Super Smash Bros. Got it? Clear as day! Not weird at all!

LEGO Brawls made its debut a few years ago as an Apple Arcade app, offering touchscreen-directed Smash-like action featuring LEGO's famous minifigures pummeling the plastic out of one another. It gives players a side-view perspective on multi-tiered battle arenas, but rather than trying to blast your opponents off of the sides of the screen, you're instead battling to claim control over specific zones within each arena. Like a King of the Hill game.

Also separating this experience from Smash's is the fact that your character is fully customizable – you build your own minifigure fighter using a variety of body parts, then unlock extra options for further modifications the longer you play. To me, though, that is a miss. LEGO has a whole lot of pop culture properties locked down, and it could have been cool to see a kind of LEGO Dimensions revival in this game, with characters like Marty McFly, Peter Venkman and Legolas all going toe-to-toe in their LEGO forms. I'd blame licensing troubles for why that isn't happening, but some film properties *are* still represented here, like Jurassic Park, so who knows what might've been possible?

We'll see what makes the cut for the final brawl soon! **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO DEVELOPER: RED GAMES RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 2, 2022 RATING: E10+

DIGIMON SURVIVE

It's survived extended delays, and it's finally on its way!

DIGIMON SURVIVE COULDN'T be a more apt title for this long-running franchise's latest release. After being announced in 2018, it's weathered multiple game delays and a developer team change, and now it'll face one last hurdle: releasing on Switch on the same day as Xenoblade Chronicles 3.

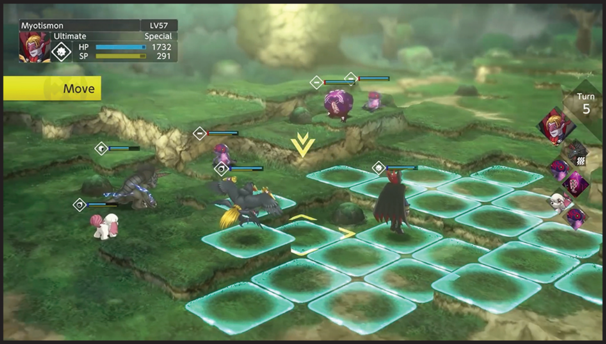
While XC3's release may overshadow Digimon Survive a bit, its survival RPG concept will offer something new compared to previous Digimon games, and that makes it instantly interesting. The game tells the story of a new cast of teenagers who, after getting lost on a school trip, arrive in a treacherous world. There will be tough choices to make, and character deaths can happen.

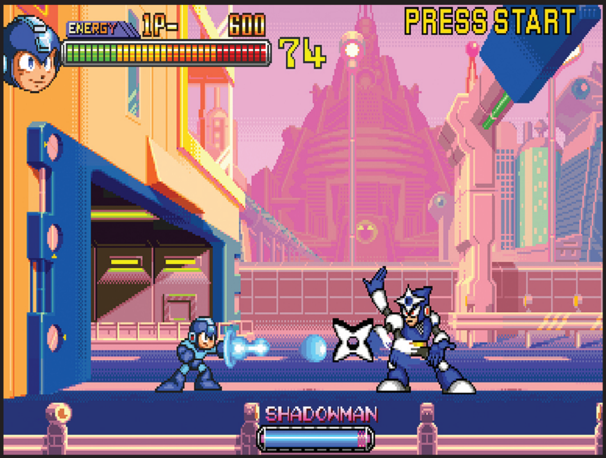
The tale will be told through a visual novel format with three routes (Morality, Harmony and Rage), while battles will feature tactical turn-based combat. In the visual novel portions, story events will occur, and you can also investigate areas, find items and converse with characters to raise affinity. Once their friendship is high enough, they will help you in battles. In combat, you'll choose units to take into battle, and there will be no shortage of options: over 110 Digimon are included, according to producer Kazumasa Habu.

So far, we've seen Agumon, Lopmon, Kunemon, Labramon and others. Each Digimon's individual stats will affect how they fare in combat. Speed will determine turn order; Digimon will have different attack ranges, and, of course, there will be Digivolutions that you'll need to time effectively!

With these elements and the game's overall somber tone from its marketing, Digimon Survive's premise and gameplay seems crafted to appeal to mature fans. For many of us who grew up watching the anime, I think it will be something worth checking out both as a way to feel that nostalgia and experience a story we can relate to as adults. **— MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: BANDAI NAMCO RELEASE: JULY 29, 2022 RATING: T





CAPCOM ARCADE 2ND STADIUM

The Capcompilations just keep on coming!

APPARENTLY THE KEY to being a successful video game publisher in 2022 is to have first been a video game publisher back in the '80s and '90s, and to have been so prolific during that time that, 30 years later, you can just keep gathering together all your old work into new compilation packages!

Not to be confused with the Capcom Beat 'Em Up Bundle, the Capcom Fighting Collection or last year's original Capcom Arcade Stadium, Capcom Arcade 2nd Stadium is another new collection of Capcom classics from yesteryear. And while I'd love to be fully cynical about that, the truth is there's still plenty of quality titles to collect!

Highlights making their re-debut in this release include the two Mega Man arcade fighting games and an old personal favorite of mine, Saturday Night Slam Masters – it pulled Mayor Mike Haggar off the streets of Metro City and had him facing off in a half-wrestling, half-Street Fighter fighting game. And then there are 29 more titles beyond those!

As with 2021's Arcade Stadium, this collection will be digital-driven, with an initial free download giving you one game, Son Son, just for trying it out. The other 31 games can then be bought as a $39.99 DLC purchase in a bundle, or bought as individual games for $3.99 apiece. So if all you want is Saturday Night Slam Masters, you can save your wallet any extra pain! **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: CAPCOM RELEASE: JULY 22, 2022 RATING: T

SONIC FRONTIERS

Will Sonic find his footing in this open world?

SEGA'S LATEST SONIC sequel seems to have shifted from promising to puzzling.

"Sonic the Hedgehog running around in an open world" has been nothing but a fan dream for years. Every once in a while some enterprising modder or YouTuber would put together a showcase of what such a game could look like, and it would go briefly viral around the Sonic fandom before being written off as something Sega would never really pursue. Sonic zipping around a world like the one in Breath of the Wild? Wishful thinking. It'd never happen.

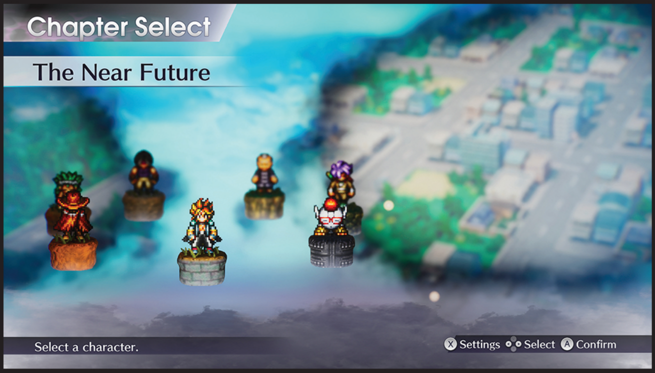
Well, *maybe* we should've been more careful about what we wished for. Last year Sega finally revealed that an open-world Sonic game actually is finally in development – but recent looks at the project in progress and hands-on with press have further revealed that they might be copying Breath of the Wild a little too liberally.

As Sonic explores the new open area of the Starfall Islands, soft piano music plinks away. Lifeless, empty landscapes roll out before him, hinting at some calamity that has played out there in the past. A sense of melancholy lays over the entire presentation. And while that kind of thing can work in a fantasy series like Zelda, does it really fit with Sonic? It seems mismatched.

More promising, from the little we've seen so far of them, are the boss battles against massive robot creatures. These sequences have more in common with Shadow of the Colossus, as Sonic uses his speed to counter the insane size of his opponents and get himself into a position to attack their weak points. Perhaps the world must be so open and empty to accommodate these titans' proportions when they finally appear in the scene?

Concerns surrounding Sonic's handling, sense of momentum and more are also swirling as Frontiers nears the end of its development cycle. Will Sonic Team work out all the kinks? We'll find out! **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: SONIC TEAM RELEASE: HOLIDAY 2022 RATING: RP



LIVE A LIVE

Lost in untranslation no longer, and newly remade in HD-2D!

BACK IN ISSUE #50, we wrote about the original Super Famicom version of LIVE A LIVE for our regular Lost in Untranslation column, and speculated that Square Enix had plans for releasing it outside of Japan, with the news that the title was trademarked in the U.S. and Australia. Western fans even asked about a potential translation of it on an official Japanese livestream back in October 2020, and they got an answer that fan support could make it possible. Little did we know that production on a LIVE A LIVE remake was already well underway at that time!

First released in 1994, LIVE A LIVE originally sold about 270,000 copies in its native Japan, but has a strong cult following there, comparable to the way the Western gaming community has embraced EarthBound. This led Square Enix to put LIVE A LIVE characters and references in some of their other titles, such as Theatrhythm Final Fantasy – but for many years the only ways to play the original were through the Japanese eShop or fan translations. With the remake being released on Nintendo Switch worldwide, this will be the first time LIVE A LIVE will be officially appreciated beyond its original home country!

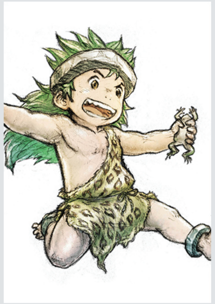
During a livestream this past May hosted by director Takashi Tokita and composer Yoko Shimomura, the updated look and feel of LIVE A LIVE was shown off, with Nobuo of the Japanese comedy duo Penguins playing through portions of two chapters. During battle sequences, there are now HP and time meters above each combatant, denoting the amount of time the player has left before the enemy combatants make their moves. There are also "weak" and "resist" icons that show up when selecting attacks, as well as new status condition icons and other in-battle effects. Oboromaru's infiltration of the warlord's castle in the Twilight of Edo Japan chapter showcased the fantastic transformation of the original Super Famicom graphics to the HD-2D world, as well as a new on-screen radar that included points of interest and a flag for the destination.

In interviews with Japanese game magazine Famitsu, Tokita said the success of Octopath Traveler and its art style led him to partner with its producer Tomoya Asano to give LIVE A LIVE the same look and feel, and once that decision was made, the rest of development went fairly smoothly, despite the impact of the pandemic and the disparate playstyles in each chapter. Instead of keeping the original's different visual styles for the main characters in each story, Naoki Ikushima, who designed the cast of Octopath Traveler, redrew all the main characters in a consistent art style.

This was the first project Yoko Shimomura scored for Square Enix after her work composing for Final Fight and Street Fighter II for Capcom, and the start to a long relationship that eventually led her to compose the scores for Super Mario RPG, the Kingdom Hearts franchise and the Mario & Luigi games. She is reorchestrating all her original compositions for the remake, including the iconic boss battle theme, Megalomania, which Undertale creator Toby Fox credits as the inspiration for *his* iconic boss battle theme, Megalovania. Another iconic track, the tokusatsu-inspired theme song for the Near Future chapter, "Go! Go! Buriki Daioh!!" is being sung for the remake's soundtrack by the legendary Hironobu Kageyama, best known for singing Dragon Ball Z's opening CHA-LA HEAD CHA-LA.

Check out the heroes and their stories on the next page. Which one will you choose first? **– REBECCA**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX
RELEASE: JULY 22, 2022 RATING: T



PREHISTORY
POGO

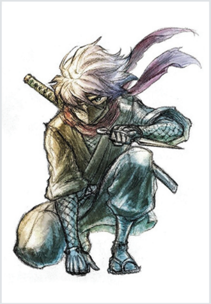
This prehistoric teenager lives with his tribe of cave dwellers and pet/best friend, Gori the gorilla. He spends his days hunting down game with his superior sense of smell – which can help him in other situations as well. One night, Pogo and Gori discover that someone's been eating the tribe's food supply, which is when they first encounter Beru, a woman from a rival tribe who is escaping from being a sacrifice to their god – a huge tyrannosaurus rex! As Pogo's story takes place before the invention of language, it's told with a combination of picture speech bubbles, yelling and pantomime, with a lot of slapstick (and potty humor).

THE WILD WEST
SUNDOWN

A man with a $5,000 bounty on his head who wanders the American desert on horseback, chased by notorious bounty hunter Mad Dog. The two of them stumble into Success Town and run afoul of the Crazy Bunch – a group of criminals who have been harassing the townsfolk – and put their rivalry aside to help the villagers defend their homes and lives. The outcome of the final battle against the Crazy Bunch depends on a timed segment where Sundown and Mad Dog collect ordinary items that can be used as traps against the gang. How many gang members can they both take out before the climactic final showdown with their dastardly leader, O. Dio?

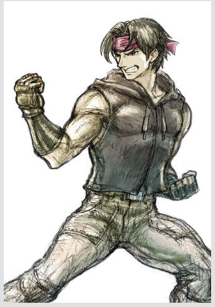
IMPERIAL CHINA
SHIFU

The elderly master of the Earthen Heart school of kung fu, Shifu has begun to realize that he does not have much time left on this earth, so he begins to search for a potential successor. He meets and trains three possible candidates: gluttonous Hong Hakka, female bandit Lei Kugo and the nervous Yun Jou, bringing much needed joy into each of their lives. However, tragedy strikes and forces Shifu's hand, thanks to an attack by a rival kung fu school led by the ruthless and brutal master Ou Di Wan Lee. Can Shifu teach his successor the ultimate technique, Heavenly Peaks Descent, and avenge the Earthen Heart school before it's too late?



TWILIGHT OF EDO JAPAN
OBOROMARU

A lone ninja from the Enma Clan who infiltrates the castle of warlord Ode Iou on a midnight mission: rescuing a prisoner held deep within its walls, a man who has the potential to shape the future of Japan. Oboromaru has the ability to cloak himself in shadow, allowing him to sneak by enemy combatants unnoticed – or he can track down and pick off all 100 of Ode Iou's men one by one. However, hidden amongst Ode Iou's stronghold along with his personal army are sinister demons masquerading as beautiful women, restless spirits, esoteric magic users and strange mechanical traps and gadgets – including clockwork people! Beware!



PRESENT DAY
MASARU

Let's get ready to rumble! Mixed martial artist Masaru Takahara is a man on a mission: to become the strongest in the world. In true Street Fighter style, he's facing off against a slew of tough international opponents, such as Thai fighter Namkiat, American strongman Max Morgan and sumo wrestler Jackie Iaukea. Whenever Masaru is hit by one of his opponents' special moves, he adds it to his repertoire – meaning you can use your opponents' strength against them! Defeat all six of his opponents, and the last opponent approaches: the brutal fighter Odie Olbright, who would kill to be champion. (Literally. Masaru specifically! Watch out!)

THE NEAR FUTURE
AKIRA

Akira is a rebellious teenager with psychic powers who lives in an orphanage along with his little sister Kaori, and he looks up to Lawless, a former biker gang member turned taiyaki seller. When Kaori's pet turtle Taroimo becomes deathly ill, Akira takes him to Toei, the local mad scientist/antiques dealer, to save his life . . . by turning him into a robot! However, behind the scenes of their peaceful lives, a sinister plot is unfolding – people are disappearing all over the city, and a strange cult has taken root in the local temple. It's up to Akira to save the world by reviving the Steel Titan, a giant mecha unearthed from ancient Babylonia!

THE DISTANT FUTURE
CUBE

This ironically named little spherical robot, a creation of the engineer Kato, is a helper aboard the spaceship Cogito Ergosum, which is transporting dangerous cargo – namely, a Behemoth – back to Earth. The rest of the crew struggles to accept him into their ranks, especially Corporal Darthe, who holds a grudge against robots. Even friendly ones that can make a decent cup of coffee! However, it's up to Cube to save the day when things start to go wrong around the ship – and his fellow crew members start to die. While Cube's story is structured as a survival horror adventure game, he can practice his battle skills with the Captain Square arcade game.

THE MIDDLE AGES
OERSTED

Once all seven other heroes' stories are completed, the eighth – and penultimate – story unfolds. Oersted is a hero of the magical kingdom of Lucrece, beloved by his people. After he wins the hand of the kingdom's princess, Alethea, in a tournament, Oersted witnesses her abduction by minions of the Lord of Dark. He sets off on a dangerous rescue mission, along with his best friend and rival Streibough the spellcaster, the old priest Uranus and the warrior Hasshe, who seeks to end the Lord of Dark once and for all. However, the happily-ever-after Oersted is hoping for is denied – setting up LIVE A LIVE's final confrontation between good and evil!

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 3

In which pairs of heroes fuse together to fight as one!

I FEEL LIKE I learn something new about Xenoblade Chronicles 3 every single day.

Perhaps the abundance of information coming out recently is because Nintendo decided to move the game's release date forward from September to July, so they have a shorter time frame to promote it.

I also think it's because this new entry in the JRPG series will be massive on all fronts, from combat and gameplay mechanics to characters and story.

XC3 will feature the new world of Aionios and unite the futures of the previous two games: XC and XC2. In fact, XC3 seems to do a lot with pairs from what we've seen so far. XC3 stars two protagonists, Noah and Mio, who are from the opposing nations of Keves and Agnus, respectively.

These nations are ruled by leaders who are both heavily implied to be characters from the previous games. Noah and Mio have their own sets of allies (see the next page), and their two groups join together after finding themselves at odds with both nations.

Duos also play an important role in combat via Ouroboros: large, armored forms that are created when pairs of party members fuse together through the new Interlink system. With six main party members, three unique Ouroboros forms can be summoned, and they each have their own designs and abilities that can turn the tide in combat. For example, Noah and Mio's fused form wields a giant sword for powerful attacks.

The new Ouroboros forms are one small piece of the puzzle that comprises XC3's deep combat system. Another notable change is players can control up to seven characters in battle: the main party of six, plus additional characters called Heroes that you encounter throughout the story. That's a big jump from controlling just three characters in past games!

Party members are classified into three combat roles: Attacker, Defender and Healer, with more specific subclasses. Attackers deal massive damage and draw a lot of aggro. Defenders protect allies and pull aggro away from others. Healers restore HP and buff and revive allies.

Characters aren't confined to the role they start in. Once certain requirements are met, they can all change to different classes, allowing for a greater variety of party configuration.

Aggro management will be important, like in previous games. But XC3 will add a nice quality-of-life feature where a red line will show when Attackers and Healers draw aggro, and a blue line will appear when Defenders are being targeted. Also, mechanics including auto-attacking, chaining Arts and combos (Break, Topple, Stun) will all return.

All of these elements make for a truly complex system and a crowded combat interface. You've got party HP gauges on the top left of the screen, enemy health gauges at the top, Arts and abilities in the bottom left and right, and you still need to keep an eye on all the characters actually fighting the battles!

Seeing it in gameplay footage already makes my head spin, so hopefully it's not too difficult to keep up with. And that's just part of the game!

XC3 will offer no shortage of content and activities, and I can't wait to get lost in the experience. I just hope it's more so due to the expansive world and not an overabundance of gameplay systems! **— MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: MONOLITH SOFT
RELEASE: JULY 29, 2022 RATING: T

SULLEN SWORDSMAN
NOAH

Like other XC protagonists before him, Noah continues the trend of wielding a bright red and powerful sword! In XC3, Noah shares that main protagonist role with Mio. The two share an Ouroboros form and are Off-Seers for their respective nations, which involves honoring soldiers who've fallen in battle.

Noah's thoughts on war may have led him to take this role. An 18-year-old Keves soldier, he struggles with the ongoing conflict against Agnus after seeing many friends die. He's an empathetic individual even toward possible enemies, and his friends trust him as a leader.

In combat, Noah is classified as an Attacker and can deal massive damage to foes. His swordfighting class features strong offensive abilities but is easily targetable by enemies. Some of his Arts include Sword Strike and Thrust Edge, which target enemies' sides and backs.

HEADSTRONG HEALER
EUNIE

Eunie's personality and role on the battlefield make up an interesting dichotomy. She'll heal her allies in combat, only to cut them down a bit with her words once the dust has settled. Eunie isn't afraid to speak her mind, but there's more to her than sassy exchanges! This 18-year-old Keves soldier cares deeply about her friends, and she collects fortune clovers as a hobby.

Eunie is a Healer, but more specifically, she's a medic gunner with a staff/gun hybrid weapon. One of her Arts creates a healing circle that will restore HP to those who stand within its circumference. Healers must be careful, however, as these abilities can also increase enemy aggro and attention.

Eunie shares the healing role with Taion, and the two share an Ouroboros form with a powerful Art that can revive all downed allies.

TRIED-AND-TRUE TANK
LANZ

With his large physique and willingness to protect his friends, Lanz embodies the tank role in the party both inside and out. This 18-year-old Keves soldier has been a friend of Noah and Eunie since childhood. His friends are his main motivation to fight, and that stems from something that happened in his past. However, his recklessness often causes Noah and Eunie to worry about him and his actions on the battlefield.

While academics aren't his strong suit, Lanz shares a love of bodybuilding with Sena, and the two join together for an Ouroboros form that specializes in protecting allies.

In combat, Lanz uses his great strength to wield a large sword that can also be used as a shield. Like Mio, he's a Defender – but he specializes as a heavy guard who can take a lot of damage. His abilities focus on attracting enemy attention.

SENPAI OF SCRIPT
MIO

At 19 years old, Mio is the oldest member of the main party, and the other team members rely on her and look up to her. She hails from Agnus and serves as a part of Colony Gamma's forces.

Mio has a serious and gentle personality, which may explain why she performs the role of Off-Seer for her home nation. She also has a hobby of keeping a diary, and she's quite meticulous about writing in it each day!

Combat-wise, Mio is a Defender like Lanz. Defenders are experts at dodging, evading, protecting allies and gaining enemy attention. With her high agility and dual chakram weaponry, Mio fulfills the role of evasion tank. She has Arts like Butterfly Edge, which attracts enemy attacks, and Air Fang, which boosts her attack power. Another of her Arts, Gemini Strike, draws in enemies' aggro and lowers their accuracy at the same time.

THE ORIGAMI KING
TAION

While he may be the most stylish of the group with his specs and scarf, Taion's brains are his most valuable asset. With his high level of insight, this 18-year-old Agnus soldier serves as the party's tactician. He tends to be cautious and at times blunt, but Mio and Sena trust his judgement in combat. Taion honed his expertise under the wing of Isurd, head military chief of one of Agnus' colonies, but the two aren't on the best of terms now.

Taion's Healer abilities focus more on subterfuge and debilitating enemies. He can inflict status effects, like putting foes to sleep, and he can make it easier for his allies to evade attacks. Taion wields an unusual folded paper weapon that resembles origami.

His talents also aid in exploration. Taion can analyze terrain and see projections of it through his eyes, giving the party a glimpse of what's to come.

COMPACT CRUSHER
SENA

Don't let this Agnus soldier's size fool you: With her giant hammer, Sena packs a serious punch, even if she's not always confident in herself and her abilities. She has known Mio for a long time and considers her to be an older sister. They're in a combat unit along with Taion – who they both trust, but also worry about.

Sena has a cheerful, shy nature and interesting flaming blue hair. She also enjoys muscle training with Lanz. The two often work out together between battles, and she sees her strength as a valuable asset to the team.

Sena is an Attacker like Noah and uses her large weapon and high attack power to smash enemies. She also has abilities that will prevent enemies from guarding, leaving them open to attack. Her offensive prowess easily draws in enemy aggro, however, so that's something to watch out for while in combat.

POKÉMON SCARLET & VIOLET

The Pokémon fandom is going hog wild once again!

DEAREST POKÉMON FANS, we are once again in the middle of a New Gen hype cycle. It's that tried-and-true promotional playbook that Game Freak and The Pokémon Company have set as the standard for the months leading up to a new mainline sequel release: dripfeeding reveals of new Pocket Monsters alongside confirmations of new gameplay features across social media every once in a while, then letting the fans fan the flames of anticipation with their viral reactions to (and fan art of) each unveiling. We've seen this same pattern of promotion so much at this point that it really seems like they've got it all distilled down to a science – they know they can go viral any time they want to, with just the right reveal at just the right time.

And that brings us to Lechonk.

Yes, the latest internet-famous Pokémon is a playful little porker who may have just been graced with the most perfect name in series history. Lechonk! How can you not smile when reading that? I assert that you cannot not smile. It demands smile-having.

Lechonk, as well as Smoliv (the smol olive) represent The Pokémon Company's ongoing knowledge that the fans they most want to attract with each new release are young'uns! I think it's fun that the monster makers are so perfectly tapping into the vocabulary of 2022 to christen these creatures. I wouldn't be surprised if some of them were made name-first!

Also bringing the series further into the modern age is the addition of four-player co-op play! It was previously revealed that Pokémon Scarlet & Violet will play out in a fully open world, letting you explore in any direction you choose, and entirely at your own pace. Well, now we know you won't have to journey alone!

Just like good old Ash Ketchum always teaming up with a few other friends to travel across new regions in the anime, so too will you now be able to call other players together to join you as you simultaenously explore this new world. This should mean that you can battle and trade with your friends at any time by meeting up face-to-face in the overworld somewhere, but perhaps it'll go deeper than that. Joining forces for double battles against the new evil team, perhaps? Entering Pokémon-catching contests at the same time to compete against real players and not just A.I. Trainers? There are plenty of possibilities!

The Pokémon Company has also updated the series website with this clarification:

"You can experience a new style of adventure, with a world that you're free to explore at your leisure and not in an order dictated by the story." This, to me, is reading like you'll be able to not only wander around where you want, but that you'll probably also be able to tackle Gyms in any order! Gym Leaders adjusting their strength, tactics and team to match challengers' skill level has been seen in the anime before, but finally integrating that into the actual games would be great!

There's much more to discuss in regards to Pokémon Scarlet & Violet, so we'll be back with more as we draw nearer to November. (Because of course that's when they launch. That's the proven pattern!) **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHERS: NINTENDO & THE POKÉMON COMPANY DEVELOPER: GAME FREAK RELEASE: NOVEMBER 18, 2022 RATING: E

THE PLUCKY SQUIRE

What happens when a storybook hero leaps off the page and into the real world?

NOT ONLY HAS the well-oiled Pokémon-manufacturing machine been steadily churning out new video games for the past few decades, but it's also apparently been elevating the talents of some key developers at the same time. Developers like James Turner, who famously earned the honor of becoming the first Westerner to design a Pokémon character over a decade ago, and then went on to an impressive career first within Genius Sonority (where he worked on games like Pokémon Battle Revolution) and then within Game Freak (where he rose in the ranks all the way to being the Art Director for Sword & Shield).

Now, James is turning the page and entering a new chapter of his journey. He's left his job at Game Freak in order to found his own studio, All Possible Futures, and they've revealed their first game: The Plucky Squire.

It's a showstopper! It's a visually striking blend of 2D and 3D action that is just so winsomely inviting.

James' signature art style is on full display as the game begins with a focus on a children's storybook that suddenly sees its illustrations come to life. The hero of the tale, Jot, sets out on a quest to save the world, turning pages as he makes more and more progress toward the final encounter.

This part of the game looks so good on its own that The Plucky Squire really could have just been that alone and still made a big splash – but the big twist is that the end of the book is just the beginning of the adventure. The villain of Jot's story is the sinister Humgrump, and when he realizes that he's doomed to be thwarted when Jot gets to the final page, he magically zaps the titular squire and causes him to be ejected from the book entirely – and he lands in the real world!

Shocked and surprised by what has transpired, Jot looks around in awe at the new three-dimensional world he now finds himself in. But a hero can't call it quits on his quest just because of something silly like getting forced into a new state of reality! So Jot sets out to explore this strange land and seek a way to return home to finish his book's tale.

Again, the art on display here is so wonderful – I personally can't wait to sit and play this alongside my kids. The 2D segments look like living cartoons, and the 3D worlds are like something straight out of Toy Story, because Jot stays fairly small when he gets bumped out of the book, standing about as tall as the average amiibo.

The game seems to have a lot of the magic of The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds in it, too, as Jot jumps back and forth between 2D and 3D, magically able to insert himself into two-dimensional scenes that are illustrated on the surfaces of objects like coffee mugs. He never just walks across these scenes, though, but has to overcome unique gameplay challenges each time – we've already seen everything from sidescrolling shooter segments to an archery minigame to a riff on Punch-Out!! with Jot boxing a big bear!

Taken all together, The Plucky Squire looks like the most exciting and refreshingly unique debut game from a brand-new studio I've seen in years. I'm eager to learn more about it! But I'll have to be patient, as it isn't due to debut until next year. (I'll go catch a Vanillite in the meanwhile, in honor of James' Pokémon career.) **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: DEVOLVER DIGITAL DEVELOPER: ALL POSSIBLE FUTURES RELEASE: TBA 2023 RATING: RP

BOOK CLUB

DISRUPTING THE GAME

We've read Reggie Fils-Aimé's brand-new autobiography. Now we're gonna talk about it!

LUCAS: Former Nintendo President Reggie Fils-Aimé was the public face of our favorite game company for nearly 15 years, and he remains a larger-than-life legend in the industry even now, over three years after his retirement from Nintendo. Recently he's been making the rounds in the video game world again to promote his new book, Disrupting the Game, in which he reflects on his time at "The Top of Nintendo" and offers interesting, never-before-told stories about what goes on within the company's notoriously secretive walls.

But, right up front, I want to give our readers a clear understanding of what Disrupting the Game really is. This book is published by HarperCollins Leadership, and it's primarily written as a reference for up-and-coming young leaders who would seek to follow in Reggie's footsteps and become influential executives at big companies across all kinds of businesses. It's not just a Nintendo tell-all book — in fact, since Reggie follows along with his life and career pretty chronologically, chapter by chapter, he doesn't even get to the bulk of the Nintendo-related content until about halfway through. I enjoyed hearing all about his upbringing and college days and the lessons he learned in his first few roles after graduating from Cornell, but I just want to warn everyone that you're not going to be getting the real tea of what Mr. Miyamoto's personality is like behind the scenes as early as Chapter 2 here.

JOHN-CHARLES: Yeah, this book is definitely not a Nintendo tell-all like I think some were expecting. Heck, the day the book came out, Mother 3 immediately began trending!

When I'm not working on NF comics, I actually work in the same industry that Reggie came up in: brand management and marketing. So I actually found a lot of his advice surprisingly helpful and applicable to the ways I think about my own daily work. Even more so since having the context of seeing how his confident attitude transformed Nintendo coming into this helped really put some added depth to his memories of coming up through companies like Pizza Hut and Procter & Gamble.

But we're not here to talk about the Bigfoot Pizza — we're talking about the Regginator and his time at Nintendo! I did find a lot of his anecdotes about his own personal closeness to Mr. Miyamoto and Mr. Iwata very touching, along with his extensive recollections of what setting up years of E3s before the debut of Nintendo Directs was like. I still remember reading about the "kicking ass and taking names" moment in Nintendo Power weeks after it happened.

Plus, if you listen to the audiobook version, there was actually a candid interview with Reggie and Geoff Keighley where they just get straight into the weeds and dirt that Nintendo fans are certainly looking for. Did anyone else digest the book that way too?

REBECCA: I got my book in physical format, so nothing in the way of audio extras for us old folks.

The one story about Reggie's time at Nintendo that really stood out the most to me was when he was working on the launch of the Wii. Reggie wanted Wii Sports to be included as a pack-in for the new system, and while he was able to convince Mr. Iwata, Mr. Miyamoto was reluctant to agree and proposed Wii Play be included instead. They ended up releasing Wii Sports as a pack-in for Western markets, because Reggie knew and believed that it was an experience that could draw people across all demographics. (Believe me, I know firsthand — my Mom, at 75 years young, still runs weekly Wii Bowling games at her town's senior center!) He knew how consumer perception shaped his products, and was not willing to budge on what he thought was a killer app for a lucrative market. That's one of the biggest lessons that I took away from reading this book: Believe in your convictions.

KRIS: The lessons are certainly interesting, though a lot of them don't really apply to my life. Probably because I'm not an executive! What I found most interesting in the book was honestly the insight into what exactly Reggie's job at Nintendo was. We all knew his title, but what he actually did with his days, and just how much influence he had in things, was fairly surprising. I always kind of figured NCL called the shots and the other regions basically just did what they were told. That Reggie had as close of a relationship to Mr. Iwata as he did, and how much his influence shaped Nintendo's direction at the time, was really interesting stuff.

LUCAS: Right. Reggie was never a video game developer, so when he was brought into Nintendo and became a public face for the company, he was instantly set apart from nearly all of Nintendo's other public faces. Mr. Miyamoto was known as the creator of Mario and Donkey Kong and Zelda. Mr. Iwata had made critical contributions to series like Kirby and Super Smash Bros. and Pokémon. Reggie? He had worked to promote bicycle brands and soft drinks and VH1 concert events. He wasn't a product creator; he was a hype man. He was the guy who stepped into a company, assessed what they were trying to sell to consumers and figured out the best, most attention-grabbing ways to do that.

And that's really what Nintendo desperately needed when Reggie arrived in the middle of the lethargic GameCube era. They needed someone to "disrupt" the old, tired ways of doing things, change the marketing message, light a fire under everyone's butts and pull Nintendo's image up out of the mud.

He succeeded in doing just that beginning with the iconic E3 2004 presentation, and it was fascinating to read his behind-the-scenes insights here about how that all came together. Reggie really had to fight to get Nintendo's stodgy, play-it-safe executives to get with the times. I probably could have imagined the pushback he got when stepping into meetings with Mr. Iwata and the rest and declaring that he wanted to open an official Nintendo press event with the phrase "I'm here to kick ass," but it's great to finally have a firsthand account of how that all really went down.

JOHN-CHARLES: Oh for sure, getting to hear the behind-the-scenes story behind some iconic E3s was amazing. You know, stuff like Twilight Princess' reveal, showing off the DS for the first time, Nintendo fans waiting in line for *hours* to play the Wii . . . and he doesn't mince words either.

KRIS: I also found the whole "Wii Sports as a pack-in game" bit fascinating, though from a different angle than I think Reggie intended. For generations now, Nintendo has put a lot of effort into maintaining value for their products. They rarely drop prices for their games anymore and all that. When Reggie was trying to convince Mr. Iwata to bundle Wii Sports, Mr. Iwata said, "Nintendo does not give away precious content for free." This line really stood out to me and made me wonder – was Wii Sports as a pack-in really the right move in the long term?

JOHN-CHARLES: It's definitely what Nintendo needed at the time. Both Reggie and Mr. Iwata ultimately saw that Nintendo needed to reach a broader audience, and thanks to their "blue ocean" strategy, the Wii became Nintendo's biggest console until the Switch.

REBECCA: One of Reggie's "So Whats" (brief summaries of the previous anecdote that presented the main lesson) talked about how he believed in "boots on the ground" leadership, and that made me think of Satoru Iwata and how he spent time getting to know every employee in his company.

JOHN-CHARLES: Oh yeah, that sorta thing came up in the Ask Iwata book too didn't it?

LUCAS: Yes. Reggie's book synergizes well with Ask Iwata. He clearly knew going into writing this one that people would want to read more about Mr. Iwata, since he had a unique relationship with him that no one else did. We get a lot of those stories, even right from the start when Reggie discusses visiting Mr. Iwata in the hospital, which was apparently something that is just never done with coworkers in Japan. No one from Nintendo had gone to see him until Reggie took that step first.

KRIS: The whole read was fascinating, but my main takeaway was just how different Reggie's approach to things was in contrast to Mr. Iwata's, especially after having read his book not so long ago. Reggie was very focused on what would make the company money, which is absolutely important, but he didn't seem to have the same kind of focus on what would keep Nintendo relevant in the long term as much as NCL did/does. Again, I don't know what the right moves in all this really were, but it was a really interesting thing to read about – especially how they respectfully butted heads.

REBECCA: I really liked how he "bookended" his whole life experience with his major experiences as a leader of Nintendo. Also, he told a story about how the Bigfoot Pizza, while popular, was beginning to drag down consumer perception of Pizza Hut's products as a whole. If he had never listened to that feedback, do you think it would have led to more missteps under his leadership of NOA?

JOHN-CHARLES: I can't help but feel like we got lucky with Reggie joining Nintendo at a point in his life when he was starting to feel more humbled about his career trajectory.

LUCAS: That humility kind of comes through here, in that Reggie does share a few stories of times in his career when his ideas failed. But one of my disappointments in reading this was that he glossed over some of the bigger missteps of his tenure, like the Wii U era. E3 2004 got a lot of attention here, in large part because that was his public introduction and it went so well. E3 2011, when the Wii U name was revealed and it landed with a thud? Not really talked about at all.

JOHN-CHARLES: Even weirder is that the following E3 is when Nintendo absolutely disrupted the entire industry with the first Nintendo Direct – the industry is pretty much ALL Directs now – and Reggie surprisingly had not much to say about that.

KRIS: So true! Nintendo Directs changed how companies communicate with their fans on a fundamental level. And Reggie was such a big part of them – his whole weird personality – especially here in the U.S.

I really would have liked to hear more candid talk from Reggie on how he felt about the Wii U during its planning phases. He mentions that there were a lot of third-party partners with a ton of games, but there's no way Reggie didn't realize a lot of those games were already outdated by Wii U's launch, and available in better forms on other platforms. The name, the messaging, all of it.

JOHN-CHARLES: Maybe there are some secrets Nintendo wasn't open to Reggie sharing on the pages just quite yet.

LUCAS: Please look forward to Reggie's "Disrupting the Game 2" in 2025.

KRIS: Maybe then we'll finally find out why Nintendo won't localize Mother 3!

JOHN-CHARLES: Oh ho ho, did you listen to the audiobook? Because he talks about exactly that topic there in the bonus section.

KRIS: I didn't! I just have the physical book.

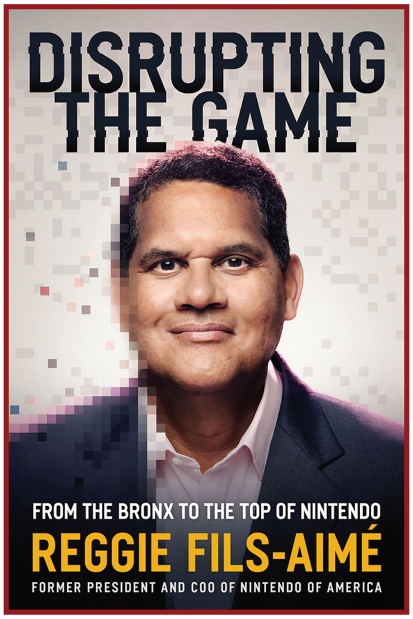
LUCAS: Final thoughts, everyone?

REBECCA: I really felt that this was less a memoir and more a handbook on how to be an effective decision maker and leader, especially for people who are interested in getting into any consumer-focused career. And if you happen to be a Nintendo fan (or pizza lover), you'll relate to his stories and lessons. I related to his anecdotes about owning your mistakes and making assertive decisions.

KRIS: My final thought is that I can't wait for Mr. Miyamoto's book. These three were like the Triforce. Mr. Iwata was a combination of Wisdom and Power, Reggie was somewhere between Courage and Power and Mr. Miyamoto strikes me as a combination of Wisdom and Courage. Hopefully that happens someday, because I bet he has some stories to tell!

JOHN-CHARLES: Like I said earlier, I actually have been working in the same field Reggie has for at least the past six years, and getting the insight of a storied professional was invaluable to me. He found ways to be assertive without being aggressive, and that's exactly what Nintendo needed at the turn of the millennium. I didn't expect to get so much from the non-Nintendo chapters!

LUCAS: And that, my friends, is the power of Bigfoot Pizza.



GRAB A COPY!

Disrupting the Game went on sale this past May and is now available at every major online bookseller and likely most brick-and-mortar bookstores as well. Its MSRP is $27.99, but most stores have it marked down to around $22 for a physical copy. I'd encourage everyone to seek out the audiobook version, though! Not only does Reggie read the whole text using his own iconic voice, but it has extra content at the end as he chats podcast-style with Geoff Keighley.

REST O

the sitcom starring a final boss and an obnoxious '90s video game mascot

by LLK

BY LINDSEY LAYNE KING

NINTENDO'S ONLY BRAWLER (KIND OF)

WARIO WORLD
GAMECUBE, 2003

Nintendo has originated or innovated in just about every video game genre there is, but their first-party contributions to the beat-'em-up category have been nearly non-existent. You could make a case for the Pokémon Rumble games being brawlers, but if you want to throw actual punches instead of Water Guns and Quick Attacks, you'll probably have to look to Wario World. This often-forgotten GameCube romp was a one-off adventure for Nintendo's greedy, cash-obsessed anti-hero. It's primarily a platformer, as Wario has to hop and bop around 3D environments, gathering coins and jewels on a quest to reclaim his lost trove of treasure. But in regular sequences like the one shown above, Wario's progress is opposed by hordes of enemies. The only solution? Beat the tar out of them, with no mercy! Wario can throw his weight around like never before, wielding a full brawler genre moveset that includes punches, the classic shoulder bash from the Wario Land games and even a wild spinning piledriver that he must have learned from Zangief. What's more, those fighting moves are integrated into exploration, as you'll sometimes have to pick up foes and toss them into targets. Truly unique! **— LUCAS**

CHARACTER PROFILE
KUNIO-KUN

The original hot-blooded tough guy! This rumbling renegade has been cleaning up the streets of River City for nearly three decades now. Maybe someday he'll graduate from high school!

FIRST APPEARANCE
NEKKETSU KOUHA KUNIO-KUN
(ARCADE, 1986)

CAREER HIGHS

Kunio burst onto the scene in the '80s and made a major impact: the impact of his fist into hundreds of poor Japanese street punks' faces!

'86

It took several decades, but we've finally hit a turning point recently when Kunio has been able to just be himself all around the world.

'20

He's been recognized for his great contributions to gaming as a whole, and even guest-starred in crossover fighter Mighty Fight Federation!

'21

Kunio-kun is a curious case of a character who's been a major part of the video game industry for over 35 years, but who still doesn't have the name recognition he deserves, since so many of those years were spent with him using other names!

'22

CAREER LOWS

'88

When he first came to America, though, everything Japanese about him was stripped away. Even his name! He was just a renegade!

'90

For years following that, Kunio's games sometimes made their way to the West . . . but never with his true identity left intact. Brutal!

'22

Wait, who decided to dredge up this embarrassing piece of his past? Kunio got arrested in 1994 in Japan, then again (in English) just this year!

Now that he's universally known as Kunio – in both his chibi-style cute form and his cooler form as seen in games like River City Girls – the future looks brighter for this bruiser than it ever has before!

HIGHLIGHTS

RIVER CITY: TOKYO RUMBLE
3DS, 2016

While Tokyo Rumble isn't a top-tier beat-'em-up from a gameplay point of view, it'll go down in history as an important release for the River City franchise nonetheless – because it was the first in the series to actually honor the characters' origins and retain their real names when being localized into English!

DOUBLE DRAGON & KUNIO-KUN: RETRO BRAWLER BUNDLE
SWITCH, 2020

There's nothing wrong with enjoying classic games like River City Ransom through their original English forms, but if you want a more authentic experience, you now have the chance to play those titles as Kunio properly by way of the recent Retro Brawler Bundle. (Another option? The Japanese version of RCR is also on NSO!)

RIVER CITY GIRLS 2
SWITCH, 2022

Finally, Kunio might be on the verge of another big boost of recognition thanks to River City Girls 2! Both he and Riki were playable in the first River City Girls game, but only as unlockables at the end of the quest. This time around, they'll both be selectable right from the start! The Girls still get top billing, of course, but it's nice to be able to jump into Kunio's shoes right away.

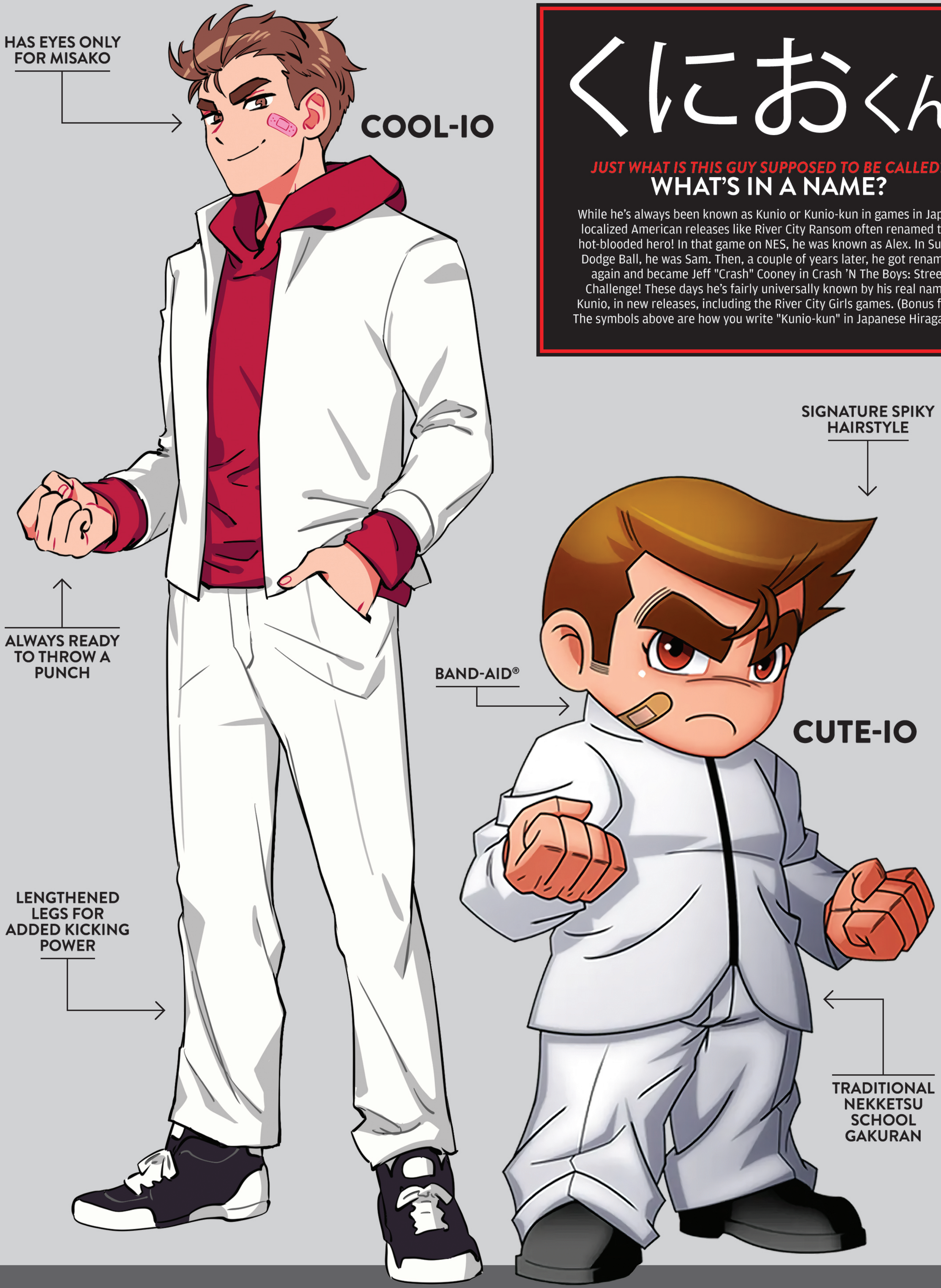
BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

くにおくん

JUST WHAT IS THIS GUY SUPPOSED TO BE CALLED?

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

While he's always been known as Kunio or Kunio-kun in games in Japan, localized American releases like River City Ransom often renamed this hot-blooded hero! In that game on NES, he was known as Alex. In Super Dodge Ball, he was Sam. Then, a couple of years later, he got renamed again and became Jeff "Crash" Cooney in Crash 'N The Boys: Street Challenge! These days he's fairly universally known by his real name, Kunio, in new releases, including the River City Girls games. (Bonus fact: The symbols above are how you write "Kunio-kun" in Japanese Hiragana!)



IT'S NEW TO ME! DOUBLE DRAGON & RIVER CITY RANSOM

Tackling a pair of classic 8-bit beat-'em-ups for the first time!

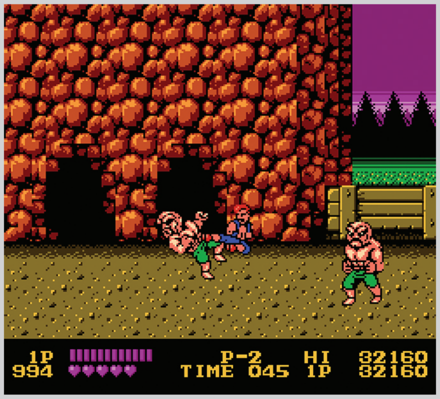
WHEN I FOUND out that this issue's theme and central feature were going to focus on beat-'em-ups, I figured I wouldn't be able to offer much help.

I usually stick to JRPGs. Admittedly, I had never played a game in the beat-'em-up/brawler genre before, so I was OK with leaving it up to the experts here at Nintendo Force.

But sometimes, a beginner's perspective can be a helpful one. Some of our staff suggested I take a few of these games for a spin and write about it, so here we are!

I spent some time delving into two of the classics: 1988's Double Dragon and 1990's River City Ransom, which are on the NES app available to those who have Nintendo Switch Online. I was tasked with seeing how far I could get without using the Rewind function.

I started with Double Dragon, and my first thought was that it reminded me of an arcade game! That's where it got its start, too, releasing in arcades in 1987, and becoming a smash hit that set the foundation for beat-'em-up games that followed. After testing it out, I can understand why.



It's pretty easy to pick up the basics of Double Dragon. You start out watching a woman get kidnapped, and then it's time to throw punches as you progress down a path to the right into different areas.

The first few enemies you encounter go down easily with a flurry of blows, but then they get tougher and have their own weapons like whips, bats and knives. The great thing is you can use them too! One of the most satisfying parts of the game was knocking an enemy's weapon from their hands, picking it up and then whacking them with it.

You can also take a few enemies down unconventionally. The boss at the end of Mission 1, Abobo, can fall off a conveyor belt and into a pit if you time it right, so I avoided a tougher fight that way.

I made it partway through Mission 3 of Double Dragon before getting knocked out for the first time, and I enjoyed it enough to go back to the beginning a few more times and try again. The simple act of busting through enemies down a linear path just felt good.

Next was River City Ransom, and I'm glad I played this one second. It's clear that it took features from Double Dragon and built upon them. One, the combat and movement speed felt much faster, and two, it enhanced and added gameplay elements.

It was an adjustment to get used to the speed of River City Ransom, but once I did, the combat felt freer than Double Dragon's. I didn't have to stick to a linear path in this game, and I got to use more items from the environment to attack enemies. My personal favorite was a trash can that you could use to whack enemies' heads as they rushed toward you.

River City Ransom surprised me with its gameplay beyond brawling with enemies. The game starts with a short summary of events that explains your mission, and there are small cutscenes as you go. You also can purchase items to heal yourself and increase your stats.

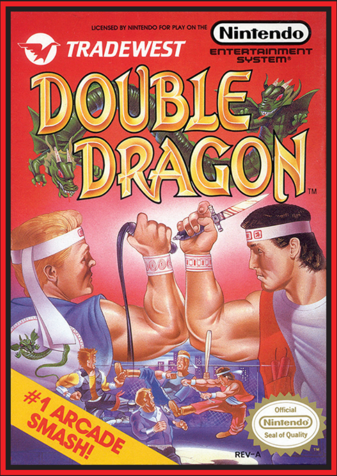
This one was certainly more of a challenge, as I got knocked out after reaching the first boss, Moose, but its features made for a cool, non-linear experience.

Since I'm used to JRPGs, their long run times and extensive mechanics, I wasn't sure how I'd feel about the more streamlined experience these two beat-'em-ups provide, but I had way more fun than I expected!

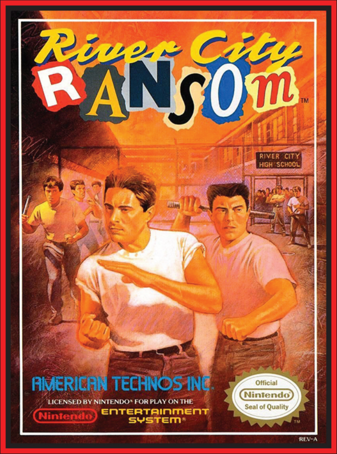
It was fairly easy to pick up the basics in these games. Getting the timing and strategy right is a different story, and I can see the fun in experimenting and seeing what it takes to get to the other side.

Plus, there's just something so satisfying about taking on dozens of enemies with only your fists, kicks (and maybe a trash can or two) at your disposal.

If the beat-'em-up genre is new to you too, try out these same two titles through Nintendo Switch Online and see how you like them! **— MAGGIE**



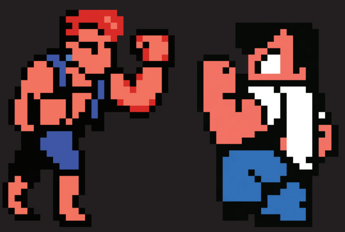
ORIGINAL RELEASE: NES, JUNE 1988
PUBLISHER: TRADEWEST
DEVELOPER: TECHNOS JAPAN



ORIGINAL RELEASE: NES, JANUARY 1990
PUBLISHER: AMERICAN TECHNOS
DEVELOPER: TECHNOS JAPAN

BEGINNER TIPS

If this issue's theme has inspired you to try out a beat-'em-up game for the first time, here's a little beginner's insight I can provide! First, resist the urge to button mash. It's tempting, but timing is important. For example, if you can land hits when an enemy can't strike back, it will inflict damage and protect your health. Second, always pick up items. It could be a weapon that causes greater damage or currency you can use to buy power-ups. Third, don't let yourself get surrounded. Sometimes enemies will come at you from both sides. Position yourself so you only need to attack in one direction, and you can take out two foes with one fist! Finally, "Go!" Keep moving forward whenever you can!



ORIGINAL RELEASE: SUPER FAMICOM, AUGUST 7, 1992 PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: TECHNOS JAPAN

AEON GENESIS' FAN TRANSLATION

Whether or not WayForward or any other Western development team ever takes on the task of officially localizing this lost Kunio quest, there's always an option for English-speaking players who want to put it through its paces: the unofficial fan translation from the Aeon Genesis team! It's been available to download since way back in 2007, and it does a great job of making the whole game readable – if not entirely approachable, since structurally it's still a bit difficult to parse. With patience, though, you can see the story through to the end!

LOST IN UNTRANSLATION
SHODAI NEKKETSU KOUHA KUNIO-KUN

The 16-bit beat-'em-up that preceded River City Girls Zero.

THE VIDEO GAME industry is incredibly secretive about upcoming projects in development, but every once in a while we get enough clues to come to fairly solid conclusions about what might be in the works next. Right now, I guarantee that *at the very least*, the possibility of finally giving an official localization to Shodai Nekketsu Kouha Kunio-kun has been discussed in a conference room at WayForward (or perhaps on a Zoom call with their partners at Limited Run Games).

River City Girls Zero (reviewed on Page 18) was first released in Japan as Shin Nekketsu Kouha: Kunio-tachi no Banka back in 1994. But it wasn't the first 16-bit Kunio game! It was preceded by this one, a game that has been casually referred to by American fans as River City Ransom 2 for decades now. In fact, it's been almost exactly three decades since it first launched in Japan, and since the countdown to a Western release began.

It's a countdown that's still going! Because while River City Ransom made a major splash on the NES, the decision makers of the early '90s decided against using Shodai Nekketsu Kouha Kunio-kun as source material to create a follow-up release. Maybe because of the art style change! This game didn't feature the chibi-styled "Cute-io" versions of the characters like River City Ransom did, but rather went back to the more realistic look of Kunio's first-ever game – the one that became Renegade for us in the West.

Another potentially complicating factor? This game doesn't take place in "River City." Kunio and his classmates are on a school trip to Osaka for this adventure, and while there Kunio gets himself swept up into the local gang war between the Osaka Union and the Osaka Alliance. Never turning down a chance at a fistfight, our hot-blooded hero leaps into the fray without a second thought and starts bashing everyone in sight.

And I do mean everyone! One surprising element of this game is that Kunio can attack not only enemy thugs but also any wandering NPC! Players can literally just walk up to and mug innocent women who are going about their normal business. Maybe that was it.

Or maybe the straw that broke the camel's back was how much more complicated this game was compared to River City Ransom. A day/night cycle included here meant a lot of time manipulation was needed to make progress through the story – players had to keep going back to Kunio's hotel room to sleep and move the clock to the next phase of the day in order to activate certain events. There were no shops – instead, prepaid cash cards could be collected and used at vending machines placed at a handful of points around the city. And the city itself could be confusing, as a common complaint even from Japanese players back in the day was that they'd get lost trying to figure out where to go next!

Whatever the reason(s) why this game never got brought to the West in the SNES era, though, I think players here in 2022 could deal with all of them. So I hope that Shodai Nekketsu Kouha Kunio-kun is being more than just discussed for localization! An announcement could even be made on its 30th anniversary!

Though, since Kyoko and Misako aren't in this one, it couldn't very well be a River City Girls game. Maybe "River City Vacation: Osaka Smackdown!" **– LUCAS**

WARP ZONE

What Nintendo Power was writing about way back when.

THE GAME THAT launched an everlasting meme is finally here, as Star Fox 64 did a barrel roll right onto the cover of the 98th issue of Nintendo Power magazine. Joining it in Nintendo 64 coverage was Vic Tokai's 3D fighter Dark Rift, Raven Software's Hexen, International Superstar Soccer 64 from Konami and the third part of NP's Blast Corps strategies, which not only shared poster space with Major League Baseball Featuring Ken Griffey Jr., but had an additional eight-page comic preview from Dark Horse as well.

As the Game Boy began to grow long in the tooth, only Disney's Hercules was on full display in this issue. However, foretelling an unusually bright, extended future for the handheld was a four-page preview of an upcoming title known simply as "Pocket Monsters" . . . or "Poke-Mon" for short.

An Nsider preview with a guide to 1997's E3 shed a little light on upcoming titles such as Rare's Banjo-Kazooie, Conker's Quest and GoldenEye 007, as well as "Miyamoto's Magic" in the form of Star Fox 64, Zelda 64 and Yoshi's Island 64, with other developers contributing Mischief Makers, Body Harvest and Tetrisphere to the Nintendo library. A full page was also given to the never-released EarthBound 64, along with various other titles to come (or in some cases, not).

Since we'd last heard from Nintendo Power Source, they'd checked out of America Online and into their own website at Nintendo.com. Make sure no one's using the phone and dial up your modem, because NOAAmy and NOATravis were here to take you on a four-page grand tour of the new digs!

This month's Player's Poll contest gave Power Players a chance to "be clay for a day" by "getting gooped at Interplay." In short, winners would go to Interplay, be rendered in clay and receive a copy of the new ClayFighter 63 1/3.

Things closed out with a Pak Watch that was shaken, not stirred by the appearance of not one, but two James Bond 007 games from Rare: the N64 classic, as well as the little-spoken-of Zelda-like Game Boy game. Besides some Duke Nukem 64 and Wario Land 2, most of the previews expanded upon titles seen in the E3 recap.

Speaking of Mr. Bond, the cover of the 99th issue was graced by none other than the then-current 007 himself, Pierce Brosnan. Alongside its 16 pages of golden coverage, the non-Squared Enix's Mischief Makers, Ocean's Multi Racing Championship, Tetrisphere and Midway's Robotron 64 filled out this month's Fun Machine fix, along with more Blast Corps comic fun and Star Fox 64 strategies (sharing poster space with Banjo-Kazooie) for good measure.

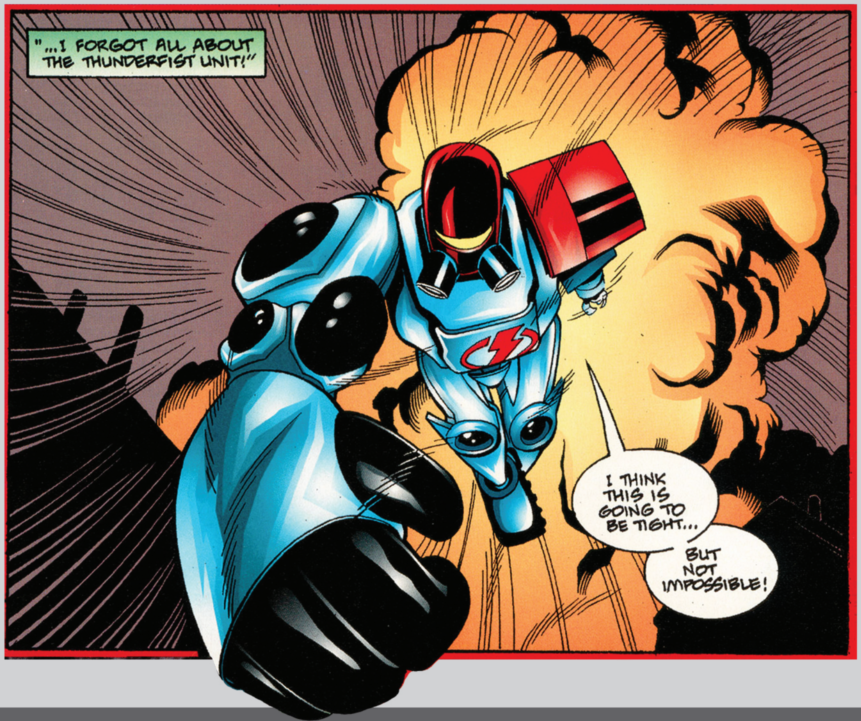
Still playing with Super Power? Gotcha covered – if you liked bowling, as THQ's Brunswick World: Tournament of Champions was here for you. On Game Boy, Ken Griffey Jr. stepped up to bat, and more Tetris was always a plus – especially when it was Tetris Plus!

Wrapping things up, Pak Watch gave us another look at Conker's not-yet-M-rated Quest and Banjo-Kazooie, as well as more E3 fun, including an interview with Star Fox 64 lead artist Takao Imamura, EarthBound designer and Super Metroid and Star Fox comic artist Benimaru Itoh and Shigeru "You Know My Resume Already" Miyamoto.

Next time: When NP hit #100! **— DAVID**

ISSUE #98: **JULY 1997**

ISSUE #99: **AUGUST 1997**



PLACE OF BIRTH
River City (a.k.a. Sacramento)

FAVORITE FOOD
Cornish Hen

LITTLE-KNOWN FACTS
I can't bend my left arm fully.

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
Game Director at WayForward

BEST KNOWN FOR
The River City series!

BANNON RUDIS

The man who set into motion the revival and reimagining of the River City series!

INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN HOLMES

NF: Before you got into game development, you worked in movies and TV shows. Was there anything about those experiences that helped prepare you for game development?
BANNON: Film will always be fighting for the top spot of my creative heart. It inspires a lot of what I do in my games. I like to create a story using the characters' actions and the world they live in. There is way more cross-pollination with film and games nowadays as technology allows us to further explore narrative storytelling with games. Games like Out of This World were really inspiring to me back in the day. Back then, that to me felt like I was playing a movie. Any time I get a chance to film something for one of my games or do something cinematic, I jump at the chance to scratch that itch.

How did you end up making the transition from film production to video game development?
I made a video game called River City Ransom: Underground (released on PC in 2017) and some WayForward people saw it. I got recommended to them by someone, and soon after they reached out to me and asked if I was interested in working with them. My wallet was quite empty at the time, and so was my stomach! So I started the next week, right away.

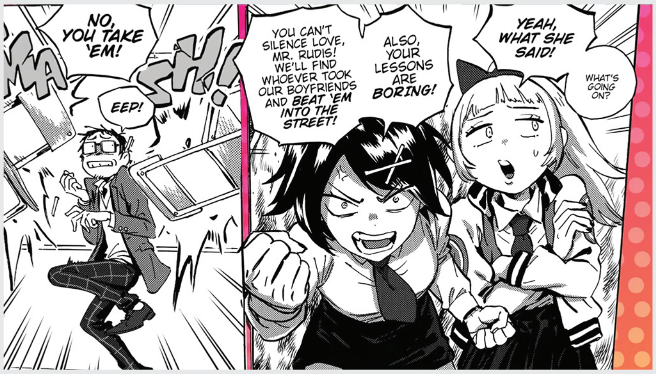
What is it about the River City series that makes you love it so much that you've dedicated nearly your entire career in games to it?
I have loved the River City/Kunio-kun series since I was a wee little lad. I really enjoyed the exploration aspect of it and especially the look of those characters. Those dumb little stupid-faced chibi characters had so much charm to them in such a small amount of pixels. That's how I learned how to do pixel animation: grabbing some River City sprites and figuring out how they squeezed so much personality into them. I basically did some reverse engineering to learn.

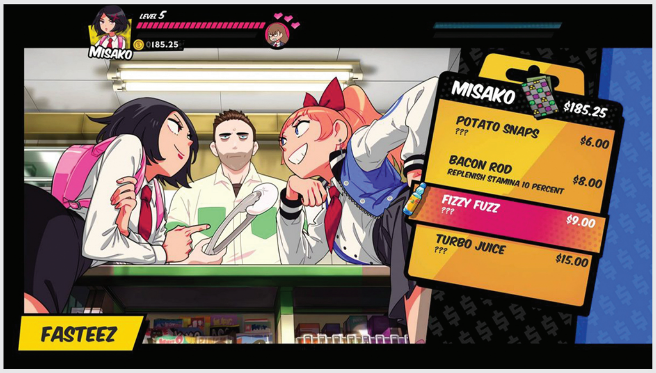
Some of your River City characters are based on real people (and cats). What is it about this particular franchise that makes it a good fit for the co-mingling of fantasy and reality?
One of the biggest pushes I wanted to do with River City Girls 2 was make sure this city felt lived-in and people were just going about their day. I did that with Underground also, with all the stuff going on in the background. There are little stories going on in my head that I incorporate into the levels.

And the thing about basing characters on real people is because, quite simply, I love adding my friends in there. Seeing how happy they get from the slightest reference to themselves in my games fills me with . . . I think it's called "joy?"

How well did the original River City Girls do compared to your expectations?
I knew people were going to like it. Beat-'em-ups in general are always a fun time. We wanted to make sure the characters were incredibly likable too, and full of personality. Even for players who'd never heard of the River City/Kunio-kun series, there was something for everyone in River City Girls to enjoy.

With games like River City Girls 2, Streets of Rage 4 and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge, the beat-'em-up genre is in the midst of a new renaissance. Why do you think this genre keeps going into and out of style, and what's driving its current popularity surge?
Beat-'em-ups were one of the most popular genres at arcades for a reason: Players love to beat up enemies with friends! The whole genre got saturated, though, and they died off for a while. Now that the days of quarter munchers are gone, I'm hoping we get to see many more beat-'em-ups that can take the genre to whole new heights in the future.





The main thing that sets the River City Girls games apart is their female leads. What is it about Misako and Kyoko that's made them such a hit?
I think it's the fact that we did a different style from what had been done for the past 30 years of this series. There was something familiar about them, but something brand-new too. It was a great mix of old and new.

On top of that, we have these two loveable idiots that cut through anything that could be taken as too serious with their "punch now and maybe ask questions later" attitude.

And now Marian (from the Double Dragon series) and Provie (from River City Ransom: Underground) are joining the playable cast for River City Girls 2. Why those two, and how do they evolve the franchise? (And how about any new cat cameos?)
To me, Marian and Provie were the only choices. Marian's small cameo in River City Girls 1 was hugely popular, and she also allowed us to bring in a different style of fighting due to her sheer size advantage over the original cast of characters. Plus she continues to blur the line between the Double Dragon and River City universes even more, which I love doing.

As far as Provie goes, I was so happy to bring her on board. Seeing her get a glow-up in the RCG style was incredibly endearing to me. I think people are going to have a ton of fun trying out her fighting moves, which are very different from the rest of the cast, but still easy to get into.

Cats have returned in this game as well, and there might be a familiar orange tabby hiding in some sneaky corner or perched up high somewhere.

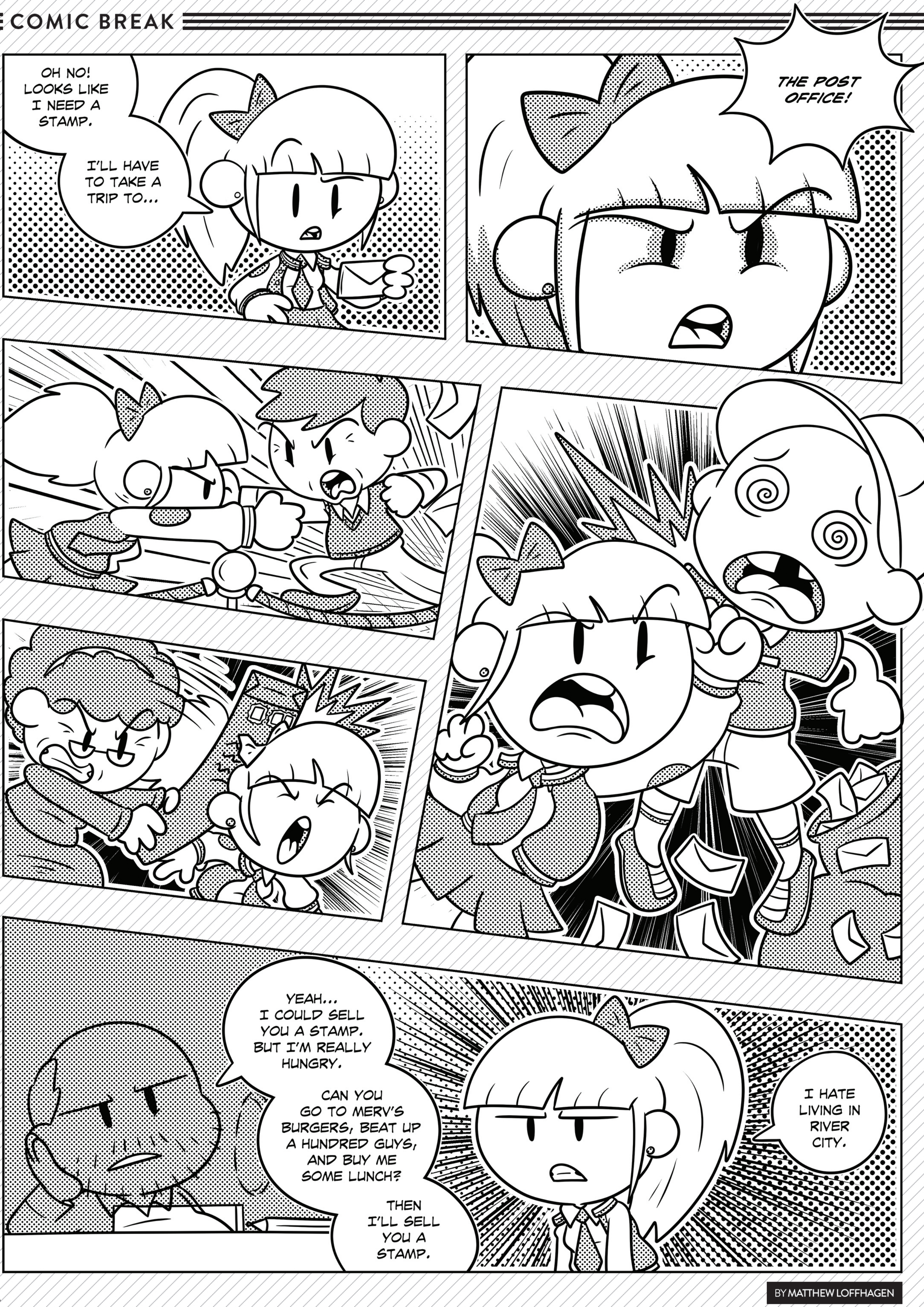
River City Ransom: Underground had some incredibly hard-to-find secrets, and River City Girls had its fair share too. What can we expect in regards to secrets hidden in RCG2?
There are even more secrets in River City Girls 2! This time, the secrets are more scattered about, and I definitely want players to explore every little nook and cranny. You are going to have to really look for them. Some of the secrets are going to be incredibly hard to find, but I trust in the abilities of the internet. Players will find them. They always do.

What advice do you have for kids who love playing beat-'em-ups and might want to make one themselves someday?
Everyone has ideas, but being able to execute them all the way to the finish line is the biggest challenge. Plan ahead and don't try to shove everything in your game basket all at once. Make sure you have a solid game before you start adding in all the extra stuff.

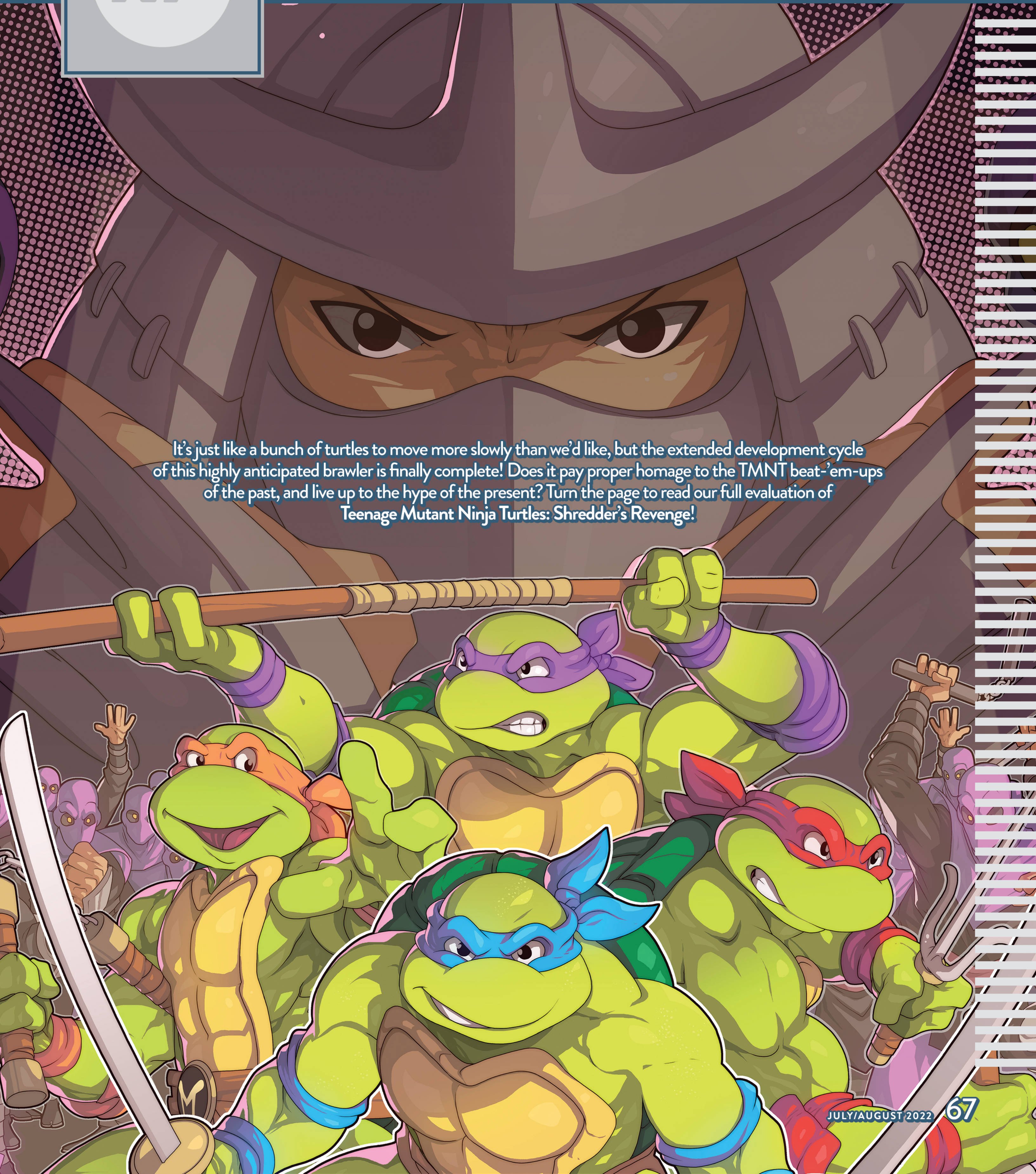
If you had an unlimited budget and total creative freedom to work on any Nintendo franchise, which would you choose and what would you do with it?
Probably taking all the Nintendo characters like they did with Smash Bros. and put them in a multiplayer side-scrolling adventure together. Imagine Mario and Link wrecking shop in the Mushroom Kingdom! Or Samus and Kirby exploring alien worlds together!

Finally, if you could have any super power, what would it be, and why?
Absorbing Man powers. I could touch gold and poop out infinite gold. Touch a cloud and go fly through the skies as a vaporous being. If there were other superheroes or villains, I could grab their abilities as well. Endless character customization.

BY BANNON RUDIS



BY MATTHEW LOFFHAGEN



It's just like a bunch of turtles to move more slowly than we'd like, but the extended development cycle of this highly anticipated brawler is finally complete! Does it pay proper homage to the TMNT beat-'em-ups of the past, and live up to the hype of the present? Turn the page to read our full evaluation of **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge!**

SWITCH
PUBLISHER: DOTEMU
DEVELOPER: TRIBUTE GAMES
RATING: E10+

Back in Action and Better Than Ever!

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: SHREDDER'S REVENGE

TOTALLY RADICAL, DUDES!

If you were a video game developer and you happened to have a time machine, and for some reason you decided to use that time machine to travel specifically back to visit me on a Saturday morning around 30 years ago, and then you asked my childhood self what the perfect video game to make would be, I'm pretty sure I would have invented Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge on the spot. This game is the stuff of a young Turtles fan's dreams. It's built on the same beat-'em-up foundation that made the original TMNT arcade game and its sequel Turtles in Time so great, but it's built even bigger and better!

There's just more of everything. More stages. More playable heroes. More fighting moves to unleash, more tunes to rock out to, more references to the cartoon source material . . . it's an all-you-can-eat Pizza Hut lunch buffet of original Turtles love.

What makes it all so wonderful, though, is that expert attention and care was paid to each and every element here. In our "Turtle Power!" issue last year that had this game on its cover, I wrote about the TMNT: Rescue-Palooza! fangame that made it its mission to cram as many characters as possible into its loosely organized story. It was great to see all those familiar faces, but there was no consistency to their appearances, so the quality of those cameos was all over the place. It was a whole big jumbled mess, which, since it was just a free fangame, was more than fine. It was fun!

But Shredder's Revenge is pure polish and professionalism from start to finish. Every character included here has been painstakingly brought back out of the past of the old 1987 cartoon, with every frame of every animation just so spot-on and perfect. Dotemu and Tribute Games were even able to bring back many of the toon's original voice actors, so all of the quips and cutscenes are as close to looking and sounding like they were pulled out of the show as possible.

The show even inspired the level structure here! Every stage is an "episode" in Shredder's Revenge, as the developers envisioned the whole story mode as if it could have been a full "lost" season of the cartoon. There is a continuity to the action, with our heroes chasing the villains as they try to rebuild Krang's robot body piece by piece, and each environment links to the next. It's all very well thought-out.

You don't just hop from one action stage to the next, though! We get a full world map in this adventure, as more and more of New York City becomes accessible as you clear more episodes. Most of the spots on the map launch you into further action stages, but an

array of supporting cast members like April’s Channel 6 colleagues also takes up residence there too. Each of them gives you an optional side mission to complete – finding and picking up hidden items in the action stages – and when you complete their requests you earn point bonuses. Points, in turn, expand each character’s capabilities by adding more health, more lives, more Ninja Power meters and even more powerful techniques to unleash once you really start to rack up enough of them.

And all of that is just the window dressing! I haven’t even begun to praise the core of the game design yet: the incredible brawling action.

Everyone was excited by the pedigree of both Dotemu and Tribute Games when this game was first announced to be in development as a joint effort between the two teams, and rightly so, because who better to resurrect the original Turtles brawlers than the same people responsible for more modern hits in the genre like Scott Pilgrim vs. The World and Streets of Rage 4? Well, this dream team did indeed make a dream happen in the gameplay here, as this is a fantastic, frenetic and fun beat-’em-up experience that beautifully picks up where old titles like Turtles in Time left off.

I mentioned "more fighting moves" earlier, and that’s the highlight here: Each character has a whole arsenal of techniques to unleash against the Foot Clan. Simple weapon strikes, rising air attacks and downward jumpkicks are all back, but complemented by dashes that can turn into bashes, backflips that are good for both dodging or getting behind a foe to hit them with a flying kick in the backside, charge-up heavy strikes that can break through the defenses of tougher, shielded foes and much, much more.

Each heroes’ Ninja Power meter is a critical component to manage. With every hit you land on an enemy, your Ninja Power grows. Once your meter is full, you can then trigger a powerful, visually flashy super strike that works to clear out a whole section of the screen in one fell swoop. (Or at least deals significant damage to sturdier opponents like bosses.) There’s an element of timing to consider with Ninja Power too, because you can also use the Taunt move to instantly fill the meter – but a Taunt will fail if you get hit while its animation plays, so you have to find a safe spot before you try it if you’re in the middle of a battle.

At the same time, it also works as a difficulty modifier! If you want a more challenging experience, you can just ignore the existence of the Taunt move entirely. But players who need the extra assistance or just want a safety net – before heading into a boss fight, for instance – can take a few seconds to ignore the flashing "Go!" arrow and stand still to Taunt a few times before moving on. Filling up that NP energy!

I really enjoyed how things like that pointed to the developers taking care to balance the difficulty for all kinds of player skill levels. All of the heroes having totally different movesets is another example of that! My favorite Turtle, Raphael, has a set of attacks that clicked well with me, so I stuck with using him for most of my first push through the story mode here. But I tried out everyone, of course! I personally didn’t click with Donatello, as his bo attacks seemed too slow and hard to connect with. April, on the other hand, surprised me as probably being the most fun out of the whole cast, as she’s crazy fast, able to run straight into the middle of a whole big group of Foot Soldiers and juggle half of them up into the air before they even know what hit them! With six different playstyles to pick from at the start (including Master Splinter!), and another unlockable once you clear the story the first time (Casey Jones!!), everyone should find just the right fit.

The developers held off on confirming those last two characters for a long while leading up to the game’s launch, and they also kept another big feature a secret: six-person multiplayer! That’s a truly wild spectacle to behold. Probably a little *too* wild, since the game becomes more of a carnival of chaos than a real game of skill with that many players all fighting simultaneously, but it’s hilarious and fun and I’m glad they made it happen.

Now, I’ve had nothing but positive comments in this review, and I’m just about to award this game a perfect score – because it is, to this grown-up ’80s kid, a perfect childhood dream of a game. But I’ll acknowledge that this game will have a lesser impact if you, or those you plan to play it with, don’t also have a lifetime’s worth of admiration for the 1987 Turtles. Even without that level of fandom, though, there’s no denying the unbelievable effort that went into making Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder’s Revenge. It exceeds expectations and succeeds as a brilliant brawler even aside from its adaptation of its source material.

I’m so thrilled this game exists now! I feel like I want to start brainstorming its sequel right away. I’ll take notes of my thoughts – in case any time travelers come asking for ideas. **– LUCAS**

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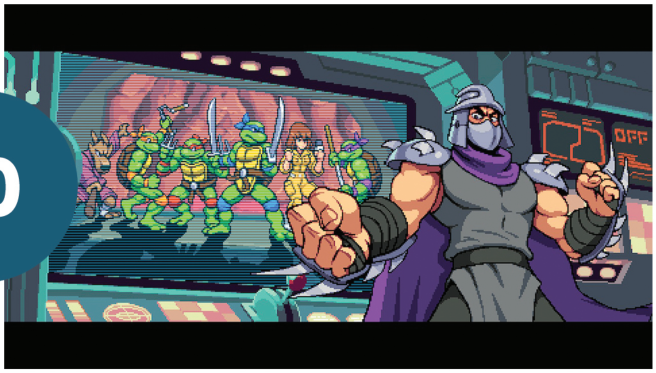


SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NEXT LEVEL GAMES
RATING: E10+

Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Soccer

MARIO STRIKERS: BATTLE LEAGUE

I'M SORRY TO say that the all-new Mario Strikers: Battle League made a poor first impression in the Thomas house.

Perhaps we were too impatient! When we first fired up the game after months of eager anticipation, Carter, Calvin and myself all grabbed our controllers and decided to set up an easy, introductory match: the three of us and one A.I. ally against a team of four computer-controlled opponents. We happily each selected our characters, decided on who the computer would command, picked the two halves that would make up the fused arena and excitedly started our first game.

The enemy Luigi scored on us in less than three seconds.

OK, weird. That must have been a fluke, right?

But then it happened again. And again after that, and then four more times before we finally managed to rally and retaliate and score one lone goal of our own. The final result of our easy, introductory match? A 7-1 total trouncing by a set of A.I. enemies that were supposedly set to "Easy" mode!

We turned the game off after that and went outside.

Now, I lay some of the blame at the feet of the developers here, as they had to have known that kids especially would want to just jump straight into playing the game from its first power-on, and they could've at least beefed up the defense of the human players' Boom Boom goalkeeper to guarantee that literally the very first enemy shot on goal wouldn't sail through to the net. Which is even more frustrating since the goalies are not controlled by the players – it would have been less annoying if we could have had any influence at all over his defensive performance, but we didn't. Dude just let it fly right past him, staring blankly at the sky.

But I do also fault our impatience, because there is a full training mode made available right from the start, and we neglected to invest any real attention there until after our trouncing. The boys didn't even know which buttons to press to pass and shoot at first, so while the difficulty was set to "Easy," that doesn't mean it's "Total Pushover Mode" that will let you just coast to victory without any effort.

So Mario Strikers: Battle League immediately introduces itself as an outlier. Whereas most every video game bearing the Mario name is built for players to be able to jump straight in and start having fun from Minute 1, this one demands that you take the time to learn its controls and rules and put in at least a little bit of practice on the front end of the experience if you want that experience to last any longer than the duration of a single soccer match.

I took myself back to the training mode, tail between my legs. But even there, the game doesn't go easy on you! It introduces each game action and the button prompts to trigger them, then pits you against, again, an easy set of A.I. opponents in order to demonstrate your understanding. I've never actually been challenged by a game's training mode before! But success in Strikers, even while just learning the ropes, takes deliberate thought and focus.

I worry that a lot of players who go into this one with high hopes might be bounced out early by this steep learning curve, and may never return to try again when there are so many other games available to play on the Switch at this point in its life cycle. I'd advise any of you who are considering a purchase to check out the free demo that's now accessible in the Switch eShop to give yourself and your family a firsthand sense of what you'd be getting into before taking the plunge with a full purchase.

All that said, for players who have the patience and skill to really learn Battle League's gameplay, there's a lot of fun to be had here!

I workshopped my own shortcomings to the point where I could be more competitive on the pitch, and now I'm at least competent (if not all that imposing an opponent). Placing shots is key, I've discovered, so you're not just kicking the ball over and over again straight into the enemy Boom Boom's gloves. And each characters' stats aren't just for show – you need to pay attention to Strength, Passing and all the rest and build out your team to complement one another.

Gear is also an essential component to take into account . . . but I didn't realize what a tradeoff each piece of equipment would introduce. Every bit of gear you buy boosts one of your stats by two points. That's good! But it also reduces a different stat by two points. That's bad. So gear isn't really increasing your characters' abilities on the whole – it's just shuffling the same quantity of stat points around to different places.

I found the only way to give a character a real upgrade was to choose one of the five stats and use it as a dumping ground. I chose to equip my captain with all the gear that gave negatives to the Passing score, so that one skill would stink, but the other four would all be better than the default of wearing no Gear at all. (Like building a D&D character and totally ignoring Charisma.)

Perhaps later free DLC updates will add new Gear options that actually have a net positive effect? Because that's another aspect of Battle League here at launch: It's not quite done yet.

I knew the Day 1 roster would be just 10 playable characters, and I expected more would be added later. (Nintendo has now confirmed that is the case.) What I didn't expect was the lack of arenas! I figured there'd be at least 10, one apiece for each character in the lineup, but instead there's only five. And they're only cosmetically different from one another! If you choose to play on the Spooky Mansion field, no Boos will appear to influence the game. Lava Castle has lava in the background – but none on the field.

That's a step backward from the previous Strikers game, which had more interactive elements like that. But maybe the devs figured the game was complex enough as it is? After all, we got beat into the turf without any extra obstacles tripping us up, so the base gameplay is more than enough of a challenge.

Mario Strikers: Battle League is best suited for players who'll have the time and inclination to put in enough practice to get good, and who will have similarly dedicated friends to play with and against. Solo players, or those with young kids? Probably safe to give this one a pass if the free demo doesn't click with you. **– LUCAS**

7.5

HE'S FIRED UP!

MARIO

Since every character in Mario Strikers: Battle League has different starting stats and a unique Hyper Strike technique, it's important to know what sets them all apart from one another! So here's a guide for you, beginning with the all-arounder everyman, Mario. He's fairly balanced, with his highest rating being Technique and his lowest being Passing. His Hyper Strike takes the form of a spinning fireball delivered with the force of a seriously powerful bicycle kick. Don't get scorched!

SPIN TO WIN

LUIGI

Luigi is actually a bit more even across the board stat-wise than Mario is when you first fire up Battle League, so newbies might want to choose him first. He also has the highest default Technique score of the entire cast, making his Hyper Strike the easiest to pull off perfectly! It appears as a gigantic, whirling tornado that spins its way toward the goal and sweeps up any defenders in the vicinity into the sky. Perhaps it's a nod to the suction power of his Luigi's Mansion games' Poltergusts?

PRINCESS OF POWER

PEACH

The prim and proper Princess Peach Toadstool has long been celebrated for her decency and decorum . . . but when it's time to play Strike her fierce inner nature comes to the forefront, and you can see she struggles to keep a cool head when things don't go her way! Speed is her best stat, so choose her to outrun all the rest of the players. Her Hyper Strike traces a magical heart shape on its way to the goal, and anyone trapped within its path will be overcome with attraction!

TONGUE LASHER

YOSHI

The Mushroom Kingdom's most dynamic dinosaur excels equally in two different soccer skills: Both Yoshi's Shooting and Passing stats start out at a 17, which is the highest default rating. So he's an expert at moving the ball! The drawback to that, of course, is that his other ratings aren't that great, so he shouldn't be your go-to pick for trying to tackle other players or to outrun anyone. His Hyper Strike puts the ball inside a giant egg that bounces three times before breaking to the goal!

USING HIS NOGGIN

TOAD

Toad, in keeping with his short stature, is a total pipsqueak on the soccer field and can't outmuscle any of the other players. He makes up for his lack of oomph with some impressive foot speed (especially impressive considering he doesn't really have any legs to speak of). His Hyper Strike is one that I would've guessed would belong to Monty Mole instead – he headbutts the ball with such force that it buries itself underground, then travels toward the goal subterraneanly. Dig that!

THE BALL BURNER

BOWSER

The Strikers version of the game of soccer doesn't seem to have any rule against just picking up the ball with your hands, so Bowser's Hyper Strike has him simply swiping the ball up off the ground with his claw, setting it aflame with his signature fire breath and then hurling it toward the opposing goalkeeper like he's chucking a baseball. Statistically you could easily guess that Bowser's got the highest rating in Strength by default, but he also scores equally highly in Shooting. (Or Throwing?)

TOTAL ICE QUEEN
ROSALINA

Interstellar traveler Rosalina never lets her feet touch the ground – but perhaps she should, because always hovering in the air has made her one of the slowest characters in this roster. She makes up for her lack of speed with exceptional skill at shooting the ball, and her Hyper Strike is the flashiest and most flamboyant of all! She literally kicks the ball into outer space, and when it crashes back down to the field it's encased in ice and causes a large portion of the ground to freeze. Brr!

GLUTEUS MAXIMUS
WARIO

All that time spent beating up on enemies in Wario World seems to have beefed up Wario's muscles considerably, as he's got a Strength rating that equals Bowser's! (And even beats out Donkey Kong's same stat by one point.) His most impressive muscles? The ones making up his rear end – because he uses his great big booty to squash the soccer ball into the ground for his Hyper Strike, after which it ricochets wildly back and forth around the field, pinging and ponging off the outer fence.

KISSED BY A ROSE
WALUIGI

While we're still waiting for Nintendo to announce Waluigi's dating sim, he shows off his romantic side here in Strikers by gripping a rose in his mouth and dancing seductively when unleashing his Hyper Strike. It manifests as a twisted mass of rose thorns that prick his opponents. Yowch! Waluigi's Shooting and Passing are garbage, but he's above average in the other three ratings, so he could be a good support player for your squad, if not quite the best pick to be your captain.

BANANA SLAMMA
DONKEY KONG

Donkey Kong's biggest attribute may be his physical size on the field – it's easier for him to tackle opponents because he's just got a larger body for them to have to maneuver around. His Strength rating backs that up, while he's equally strong at Passing, so you know he'll be able to get the ball back to speedier teammates when it comes his way. His Hyper Strike calls forth the power of potassium, taking the shape of a gigantic magical banana in the air and slingshotting the ball forward.

DEFENSIVE FORCE
BOOM BOOM

You can build your team of four field players with any combination of the other characters seen here, but the fifth player on your squad is always Boom Boom. He is the goalkeeper, and for the most part he operates entirely independently, his actions driven by the A.I. of the game itself. But when the enemy team uses a Hyper Strike against you, Boom Boom will become briefly playable as you're called upon to mash buttons as fast as you can to help him resist the power of the shot.

DLC ADDITIONS
AND MORE?

That's all for the base roster in Mario Strikers: Battle League . . . but there's more where they came from! Nintendo – much to the dismay of some incredibly vocally angry fans pouting about the practice across social media – is once again employing their strategy of extending the conversation about this latest Mario sports game by planning to add extra content, including more playable characters, in the months following the game's launch.

So who can we expect to see? Princess Daisy is the one fans have been most mad about being missing, since she was in the default roster of the previous Strikers titles – it's safe to say she'll be making a comeback soon. Supporting characters like Shy Guy are a safe bet, and maybe the big bruiser Petey Piranha, who was unlockable in Mario Strikers Charged? Maybe some new field types, too, I hope!

Another Repackaging of Pac-Man's Past

PAC-MAN MUSEUM +

WITH SO MANY Pac-Man collections already in the world, it's fair to ask what exactly makes this one different enough to be worth your while. After all, there are currently plenty of other ways to get your Pac-fix on Nintendo Switch! The answer is actually quite simple: There's never been a more quality-Pac-ed, well-rounded compilation specifically dedicated to Pac-Man's adventures than Pac-Man Museum +, and if you're a fan, you'll want to gobble this game up faster than a Power Pellet.

The most important thing in any compilation is the game selection, and Museum + delivers in spades. There's an arcade-perfect rendition of the original Pac-Man, as well as its direct follow-ups Super Pac-Man and Pac & Pal. These two are ultimately more interesting than they are fun to play, but they're still pretty creative takes on the original formula.

Pac-Land is a weird one because it's more of a platformer than a Pac-Man game, but it's still sort of fun, if ultimately forgettable.

Pac-Mania was a return to form for the series with original Pac mazes viewed from a pseudo 3D angle. It introduced a jumping mechanic, background music, new ghosts and more.

Pac-Attack is a genuinely great falling-block puzzle game and makes clever use of its Pac-Man ties.

Pac-In-Time is a weird 16-bit platformer that's a little hard to wrap your head around, but can be cool once you get the hang of it.

Finally, Pac-Motos and Pac 'n Roll Remix are both fairly decent arcade-style action games that involve rolling Pac-Man around to either knock enemies off the screen or navigate obstacle courses.

Beyond those, you'll find the real MVPs of the collection. There are two different versions of the great Pac-Man Arrangement, which is an ultra-creative take on the classic Pac-Man formula that includes dash pads, special power-ups and more. They're a blast, and one of them even features simultaneous multiplayer.

Speaking of which, Pac-Man Battle Royale is local multiplayer gold. It's not a very deep game, but if you've ever tried to play it in arcades you know it can be a VERY expensive proposition. Having it here, playable in your home, is arguably worth the price of admission alone.

Pac-Man 256 is another great, modern take on the classic Pac concept in which you have to travel as far as you can through an endless Pac-Man maze that's slowly being eaten up by the original arcade game's iconic kill screen. Last but not least, we have the absolutely stellar Pac-Man Championship Edition, which is nothing short of a master class in retro arcade style design.

The whole compilation is wrapped up in a really fun presentation: You get to design your own Pac-Man-themed arcade! Each time you play a game, you earn various points and currencies that can be spent on knickknacks, wallpapers and arcade cabinets to fill your space with. It's just cosmetic, but it's still really cool.

Unfortunately, you also have to unlock a number of the games before you can play them, which can be a bit of a hassle for folks who want to just dive right in, but every game also has a list of achievements that can provide unique challenges beyond just getting the highest scores you can. There's a lot of replay value here for sure.

The lack of stuff like Pac-Man 2: The New Adventures, the infamous Atari 2600 port and anything related to Ms. or Jr. Pac-Man is noticeable, but the amount of quality stuffed into this collection more than makes up for any absences. Everything plays really well, too. I'm no Pac Pro, but I didn't notice any sort of game-breaking lag in my time with it. Simply put, this is a fantastic collection that's well worth coming down with a case of Pac-Man fever for! **— KRIS**

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: BANDAI NAMCO RATING: E

Animetroidvania

RECORD OF LODOSS WAR: DEEDLIT IN WONDER LABYRINTH

RECORD OF LODOSS WAR began as a series of text adaptations of someone's Dungeons & Dragons campaign, printed in the Japanese game magazine Comptiq. It quickly became a hit, spawning its own tabletop RPG, as well as a series of novels, manga and anime. This was long before Critical Role and other modern actual-play podcasts followed the same trajectory. Their related popularity is proof positive that the classic D&D framework can always find an audience, though the more authentic enthusiasm you have for those old tropes, the better your chances of success.

Deedlit in Wonder Labyrinth takes its best shot at infusing the high fantasy classic with this brand of new energy, and it's got more going for it than you might expect from a relatively unknown team working with a nearly 40-year-old niche franchise. It looks and plays a lot like Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, the title that essentially started the Metroidvania subgenre of sidescrolling action games. In fact, some of lead character Deedlit's frame-by-frame animations look like redraws of Alucard's same moves! Still, that's not such a bad thing, seeing as both Konami (Castlevania's publisher) and Koji Igarashi (the director of Symphony of the Night and its spiritual successor Bloodstained) haven't made a 2D pixel art game like this in about a decade.

Wonder Labyrinth's looks may suck you in, but that will only take you so far. Without great music to keep your motivation up after you get lost in the depths of monster-filled mazes, a great arsenal of powers to collect and copious surprises that keep you curious about what's happening next, even the best-looking Metroidvania will become a slog. On these three points, Deedlit's Big Adventure is more of a mixed bag. The soundtrack is largely uninspiring, and it rarely changes. The environments you battle through don't do much to stimulate your brain either.

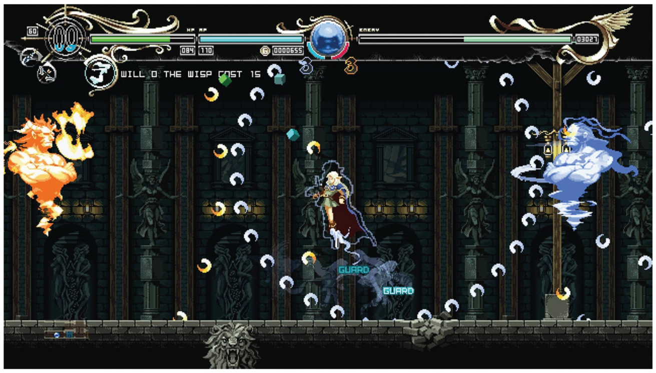
The key way the game stands out is through its Ikaruga-esque color changing system. Early on, you gain the ability to fuse with blue or red magic. Blue allows you to float through the air; red lets you do an invincible slide attack. When in "red mode," you can walk through lava and take hits from red attacks without taking any damage, and vice versa. Leveling up one or both sides of your magical schism can allow you to automatically refill your health. This adds a fine level of strategy that's always running underneath the usual genre trappings of leveling up, finding new weapons and gaining new abilities.

Wonder Labyrinth also isn't afraid to kill you. The first two bosses aren't too tough, but after that, falling into a pit of spikes, stumbling upon a giant, screen-filling dragon or two or simply getting your butt kicked by enemies that you aren't tough enough to fight yet becomes a relatively common occurrence. Other party members like Ghim the Dwarf (who can sell you better weapons) and Woodchuck the Thief (who lets you play a potentially highly profitable game of dice) help out here and there, but you're largely on your own. This may make you grateful that the map itself is relatively small, and it's filled with save statues and fast-travel waypoints. A deathless run would take less than four hours, but thanks to all the times you'll get clobbered, most will need closer to eight to see it all.

If it had been released closer to the franchise's heyday, Deedlit in Wonder Labyrinth could have been seen as one of the all-time greats. As it stands, it's a fun stew of mixed influences that often does things by the numbers, but goes harder with its art than it has to. When rolling for a review score, this game gets an . . . **— JONATHAN**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: PLAYISM DEVELOPERS: TEAM LADYBUG & WSS PLAYGROUND RATING: E10+



A Rumble with Knuckles
SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2

IN FEBRUARY 2020, Sonic the Hedgehog hit theaters nationwide and managed to completely exceed expectations. Which, as hard as it is to remember now (or at least, it would be, were it not for "Ugly Sonic" getting a prominent cameo in Disney's new Chip 'n Dale: Rescue Rangers film, but we won't get into that here), would not have been a difficult feat to accomplish, given how bottom-of-the-barrel those expectations originally were.

That posed a new challenge for the filmmakers working on the sequel: Could they take it to the next level? I think the answer is yes. Yes, they could . . . for the most part. But we'll get into that.

If there's one problem that many movies of this type face, it's being what TV Tropes calls a "Human-Focused Adaptation." The first movie even faced this to some degree, though TV Tropes notes it was downplayed. That is, things were pretty balanced between Sonic and Tom, but even this was too much for some.

In Sonic 2, this ends up being far less of an issue. The start of the movie has Sonic trying to be a hero on his own, before seeing Tom and Maddie off on a trip to Hawaii (via Warp Ring, of course), and that's where the real fun begins. With that element out of the way (aside from the occasional peeking in), we get precisely what we want out of a movie called Sonic the Hedgehog: Sonic the Hedgehog. And Tails! And Knuckles! And of course, Dr. Robotnik, who *is* a human, but kind of an exception to the aforementioned trope here. (Plus, while you could argue that Jim Carrey doesn't go "full" Eggman here – he's still pretty slim – pretty much everything else about him lines up nicely.)

It's a zany, wacky, adventurous blast as Sonic and Tails go off on their quest, trying to stay one step ahead of Robotnik and Knuckles. Unfortunately, as things reach something of a fever pitch, they hit something of a wall.

The second act is probably nothing if not contentious. This is where the main human cast earn their payday, and to be honest, it almost feels like the movie we were just watching – the fun adventures of Sonic and Tails versus Knuckles and Robotnik – is effectively put on hold. While it's difficult to begrudge this part *too* much, as it not only pays off some stuff set up earlier and arguably redeems one of the less-likeable characters from the original movie, but also lays some serious groundwork for future developments, it's still a rather jarring transition. I would even go so far as to argue that on repeated viewings, you can probably skip the entire second act and not lose a whole lot of the experience. And I say this as someone who actually kinda *likes* the human cast.

After that, though, things pick up quite nicely – enough that I dare say it makes up for the aforementioned second act. Without spoiling too much, things get *very* Sonic-y in the final stretch of the movie, and I loved every bit of it. There is a definite appreciation and affection for the source material here, and as a Sonic fan, it was just great to soak it all in. And even having a good idea of what was going to happen, certain aspects of *how* they happened still managed to surprise and delight me.

In addition to getting a fun adventure (mostly) starring some of our favorite characters from the games, a special mention is warranted for Knuckles. Recently he's been "dumbed down" into a meathead of sorts, the epitome of which was in Sonic Boom. Here, however, we have a much more classic take on Knuckles – one who may not be the smartest, but is naive yet noble and well-meaning. It felt more like a fresh take on a character I've long known and loved.

Overall, Sonic the Hedgehog 2 may not be the *perfect* Sonic movie, but it's a leap over the original, and makes Sonic the Hedgehog 3 (& Knuckles?) look very promising, indeed. **– DAVID**

MOVIE DISTRIBUTER: PARAMOUNT PRODUCTION BY: SEGA, BLUR STUDIO, ORIGINAL FILM, MARZA A.P., PARAMOUNT ANIMATION, HEDGEHOG FILMS, INC. & DJ2 ENT. RATING: PG

ARCHIVE

The complete list of Nintendo Force retail reviews from the last two years. Scores reflect individual reviewers' opinions.

SWITCH

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
Alex Kidd in Miracle World DX	7.5	David	#54
Ary and the Secret of Seasons	6.0	Lucas	#49
Atelier Ryza 2: Lost Legends & the Secret Fairy	8.0	Maggie	#51
Atelier Sophie 2: The Alchemist of the Mysterious Dream	8.0	Maggie	#59
Bakugan: Champions of Vestroia	6.5	Lucas	#51
Balan Wonderworld	5.0	Lucas	#52
Big Brain Academy: Brain vs. Brain	8.0	Kris	#58
Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night	7.5	Tony	#48
Blue Reflection: Second Light	8.5	Maggie	#57
Bravely Default II	9.0	Nadia	#52
Catherine: Full Body	8.5	Jonathan	#49
Clubhouse Games: 51 Worldwide Classics	8.5	Lucas	#48
Cobra Kai: The Karate Kid Saga Continues	6.5	Kris	#50
Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time!	8.5	David	#52
Cris Tales	6.5	Maggie	#57
Cruis'n Blast	8.0	David	#56
DC Super Hero Girls: Teen Power	7.0	Kris	#53
Deadly Premonition 2: A Blessing in Disguise	7.0	Jonathan	#49
Doki Doki Literature Club Plus!	8.5	Rebecca	#55
Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot	6.0	Kris	#56
G.I. Joe: Operation Blackout	6.5	Lucas	#54
Hot Wheels Unleashed	7.5	Lucas	#56
Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity	8.5	Tony	#50
Indivisible	7.0	Tony	#47
John Wick Hex	7.5	Chris	#51
Kingdom Hearts: Melody of Memory	7.0	Tony	#50
Kirby and the Forgotten Land	10	Lucas	#59
LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga	9.0	Thor	#59
Mario Golf: Super Rush	9.0	Lucas	#54
Mario Kart Live: Home Circuit	9.5	Lucas	#49
Mario Party Superstars	8.5	Lucas	#57
Metroid Dread	9.0	Tony	#56
Miitopia	7.5	Brett	#53
MLB The Show 22	8.5	Dan	#59
Monster Hunter Rise	9.0	Lucas	#52
Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings of Ruin	9.0	Maggie	#54
Moving Out	8.0	Lucas	#47
NEO: The World Ends with You	8.0	Rebecca	#55
NERF Legends	4.0	Lucas	#57
New Pokémon Snap	9.0	Lucas	#53
Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom – Prince's Edition	8.5	Brett	#56
Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl	7.5	Brett	#56
Nickelodeon Kart Racers 2: Grand Prix	7.0	David	#50
No More Heroes III	9.5	Jonathan	#55
Paper Mario: The Origami King	8.5	Brett	#48
Paw Patrol Mighty Pups: Save Adventure Bay!	8.5	Lucas	#51
Persona 5 Strikers	9.0	Maggie	#52
Pikmin 3 Deluxe	9.5	Lucas	#50
Pokémon Brilliant Diamond	6.5	Rebecca	#57
Pokémon Legends: Arceus	9.0	Lucas	#58
Pokémon Shining Pearl	6.0	Lucas	#57
Puyo Puyo Tetris 2	8.5	Rebecca	#50
R-Type Final 2	7.5	Jonathan	#53
Rune Factory 5	7.5	Maggie	#59
Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin	8.5	Lucas	#50
Shadowverse: Champion's Battle	8.0	Maggie	#55
Shin Megami Tensei V	8.0	Meghan	#57
Sonic Colors: Ultimate	5.0	Kris	#58
Story of Seasons: Friends of Mineral Town	7.5	Rebecca	#48
Story of Seasons: Pioneers of Olive Town	6.5	Rebecca	#53
Super Mario 3D All-Stars	7.0	Lucas	#49
Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury	10	Lucas	#51
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Mania	8.5	David	#56
The Caligula Effect 2	8.0	Maggie	#58
The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles	9.0	Rebecca	#54
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel III	9.0	Maggie	#49
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel IV	9.0	Maggie	#52
The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword HD	9.0	Lucas	#54
The Outer Worlds	8.0	Matthew L.	#47
The Wonderful 101: Remastered	9.0	Jonathan	#47
Transformers: Battlegrounds	7.5	Lucas	#54
Trials of Mana	8.5	Brett	#47
Triangle Strategy	9.0	Nadia	#59
WarioWare: Get It Together!	7.5	Rebecca	#56
World's End Club	6.5	Kris	#55
Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition	10	Lucas	#48
Ys IX: Monstrum Nox	9.0	Lucas	#55

SECOND OPINION
RIVER CITY GIRLS

I LOVE THAT we're now in an era where true love of classic franchises is shining through in new sequels. Enough time has passed that the torch has been passed from the original creators to a new generation of developers – people who grew up playing games in these series as kids are now getting to put their own stamp on their legacies as adults.

So much love, respect and deep knowledge of the decades' worth of lore of the Kunio-kun series shines through in every scene of River City Girls. You can just tell at every moment that the developers were so geeked to be able to bring this game to life! It's like a Smash Bros. crossover celebration of cameos and callbacks to not only classic Kunio games, but also the Double Dragon series, obscure brawlers like The Combatribes and more.

But that would all just be window dressing without the core game design, which is the most impressive part of the package. River City Girls really understands what makes for a great beat-'em-up, and it keeps you hooked from your first fracas in the middle of a high school classroom all the way through the final showdown in a yakuza's penthouse towering far above River City. I was so impressed by the depths of the movesets here – both Kyoko and Misako have a huge variety of techniques to unleash, and then the game goes the extra mile by making both Kunio and Riki also playable after they're "rescued" at the end of the tale. They too have fully unique sets of moves!

Top it off with great graphics, great music and wonderful voice acting, and I can see why Jonathan loved this game so much. I do too! **– LUCAS**

9.5 JONATHAN

9.5 LUCAS

BEAT-'EM-UP BOOK REVIEW

Bitmap Maps Out Beat-'Em-Up History

Flip your way through over 450 pages of brawler retrospectives!

IN THIS ISSUE we've endeavored to offer our readers an overview of the beat-'em-up genre, in the hopes that some new players might perhaps feel inspired to hit the streets themselves in any one of the many games we've mentioned. But if you're looking for a resource that goes into more depth on this same topic, then by golly have I got the book for you!

Go Straight: The Ultimate Guide to Side-Scrolling Beat-'Em-Ups is the latest release from Bitmap Books – and what a release it is! It is a massive examination of nearly the entire history of the brawler genre, giving individual attention to every single game in the category released between the years of 1984 and 2020.

In fact, it might be too massive for its own good! Its hardcover exterior and over 450 interior pages add up to a weight of six pounds (seriously, I used my bathroom scale to check). It's therefore unfortunately a little unwieldy and uncomfortable to try to sit with and flip through as you would just about any other book (or magazine). So in order to read it, I've personally taken to laying it flat on a table and carefully turning its pages one at a time, like some elderly wizard in a fantasy movie pouring over the wisdom of an ancient tome of magical lore.

That's not too far off from how I feel about the content here, really, as this book was clearly so deeply researched and lovingly crafted that it does seem kind of magical! Author Dave Cook – who is also a comic writer, as you'll see on Page 80 ahead – may be the world's foremost expert on brawler games, and he went through the time and effort of personally playing hundreds upon hundreds of entries in this genre in order to write firsthand accounts of each one here. What results is a reference that holds excellent information on individual releases from over the decades, but also a unifying understanding of how the genre evolved over those same decades to arrive at where we are now.

Also fun is the layout and overall look of the book, including several instances of extra-wide fold-out pages filled with classic screenshots, character galleries and more. It's really a lot.

. . . But it's not *entirely* comprehensive. Dave has written this book from the perspective of a Western gamer, so it skips covering Japan-exclusive games for the most part, including lots of the Kunio series. Still, if he had included Japan's beat-'em-ups too, the whole book probably would have ballooned up to something like 12 pounds, and at that point you might break your foot if you dropped it. **– LUCAS**

9.0

BitmapBooks.com

BEAT-'EM-UP BOOK REVIEW #2

HARDCORE GAMING'S GUIDE

An alternative option! The team at Hardcore Gaming 101 has composed their own textbook of brawler history.

IF YOU WANT to dig even deeper into the beat-'em-up genre, The Guide to Beat-Em-Ups: Volume One from the phenomenal video game reference website and book publisher Hardcore Gaming 101 is another excellent option to consider. Written by Kurt Kalata with a whole host of contributors, this book is the first in a series covering the popular "Go Right" commanding category of games that has experienced a resurgence in the past few years.

Four of the largest beat-'em-up contributors are covered here: Technos, Capcom, Konami and Sega, with Technos' selection of games being so voluminous it nearly takes up half the book by itself! The number of Technos' Kunio-kun-related games by itself is quite surprising once you take into account the Japanese releases that never made it Stateside until recently! With Volume One being comprised of the heaviest of hitters in the beat-'em-up genre, you're going to find the most popular and historically significant jawbreakers here, including seminal standards Double Dragon, Final Fight, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Streets of Rage.

The quality of the book itself is just what you'd expect from Hardcore Gaming 101: excellent writing filled with both the history of the games featured as well as comparisons between different versions of each game. There are plentiful screenshots throughout, as well as box and ad art that are clear and brightly colorful. I especially enjoyed the screenshot comparisons between the different versions for the more popular games. (Seeing the Atari 2600 version of Double Dragon included here just brings a tear to this old gamer's eye!)

The writing is both informative and entertaining, with every game featured having at least one complete page of coverage chock-full of historical facts, release dates, available platforms and reviews. If you're looking for the highest quality rendering of Capcom's seminal brawler Final Fight, you'll find it here. (In case you were wondering, it's the arcade version of course. Nearly every other version has been edited in one way or another – though I'm partial to the Game Boy Advance release myself.)

The book also features related subtopics like the secret origin of Final Fight's bad girl Poison and other related trivia, as well as information on the cartoon, movie and comics for Double Dragon.

Since this book was published in July 2021, you won't find newer games like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge here, but luckily we have you covered with our review back on Page 68!

I really enjoyed The Guide to Beat-Em-Ups: Volume One and am looking forward to the subsequent volumes in the series. If you'd like your own copy, it's available on the Hardcore Gaming 101 website as well as Amazon. You should "Go Right" to one of those places and check it out! **– THOR**

9.0

HardcoreGaming101.net

COMIC CREATOR SPOTLIGHT

Team Beats Comics

Working to bring back Ninja Baseball Bat Man!

IF YOU'RE ONE of the lucky few who have ever played Ninja Baseball Bat Man, you're probably itching for more content from the game's bizarre baseball-themed universe. Fortunately for us all, writer Dave Cook and artist Steve Gregson have teamed up to bring the world exactly what it's been missing: more ninja baseball action!

Ninja Baseball Spirits is a comic book adaptation of Irem's 1993 arcade classic (see Page 40) that promises to deliver a modern reboot of everyone's favorite baseball-themed brawler, and they've even got the game's original designer Drew Maniscalco on board to help!

Since the arcade original was only produced in extremely limited quantities, Cook discovered the game the same way most people did: through the magic of the internet. "I first learned of Ninja Baseball Bat Man thanks to the Angry Video Game Nerd's YouTube review," said Cook. "Having gotten to know the game's creator over the years, he said that emulation and word of mouth is how the game's popularity grew over time, turning into the cult hit it is today."

Dave and Steve, together known as Team Beats, are no strangers to adapting the world of beat-'em-ups to the written page. In addition to Cook having authored Go Straight (featured just two pages ago), they previously collaborated on a tribute comic called BPM: Beatdowns Per Minute, which itself is an homage to classics like Final Fight and Streets of Rage. (Main character Maya and her flaming fists seen to the right.) This makes them the perfect team to tackle introducing Ninja Baseball Bat Man to a new audience.

"It's a five-part series that's already written, so we've got the script locked in," said Cook. "Like the game, it gets more zany and action-packed as it goes."

Patreon.com/TeamBeats

The series follows the adventures of Captain Jose, Stick Straw, Beanball Roger and Twinbats Ryno as they try to recover the six golden relics that have been stolen from beneath Champion's Field. Using their special championship rings that transform them into Baseball Ninjas, they'll travel across the country to save America's pastime from a series of evil All-Stars, each representing rival sports like football, basketball, pro wrestling and even eSports. Our heroes won't be going alone, either! The Atomic Cheer Squad and their trusty team crew will also board their high-tech bus The Alabaster to reclaim baseball's missing treasures.

The comic will be funded via a series of Kickstarter campaigns, and depending on how successful they are, there could be some very cool things in store for fans, including art prints by guest artists, branded shirts, baseballs and more. Each issue will get its own individual campaign, so don't worry – if you missed the first one, you can always jump onto the next! You can also support Team Beats via their Patreon page.

Could this comic prompt a revival of the original game? We certainly can hope it will!
– KRIS

BY THOR THORVALDSON

NEXT ISSUE

It's almost time to refill your ink blasters, because **Splatoon 3** is about to land on the Switch in September! We'll take a closer look at that highly anticipated threequel, as well as give you a refresher on **Bayonetta 3** and reviews of three other "3" games: **River City Saga: Three Kingdoms**, **Fire Emblem Warriors: Three Hopes** and **Xenoblade Chronicles 3**. If NF #61 were a basketball shot, it'd be a three-pointer for sure!

But don't worry about any non-3s on the horizon – we'll be sure to cover them too. I mean two! *I mean three!* (Oh dear, we're in trouble.)

IN THE WORKS FOR ISSUE #61:

SPLATOON 3

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 3

BAYONETTA 3

FIRE EMBLEM WARRIORS: THREE HOPES

RIVER CITY SAGA: THREE KINGDOMS

RIVER CITY GIRLS 2

ADVANCE WARS 1+2: RE-BOOT CAMP

LIVE A LIVE

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: THE COWABUNGA COLLECTION

MARIO KART 8 DELUXE: BOOSTER COURSE PASS - WAVE 2

MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

SPIDERSAURS

PIKMIN 4

METROID PRIME 4

DIGIMON SURVIVE

AND MUCH **MORE!**

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CAN YOU BEAT A RETRO BEAT-'EM-UP?

OUR LATEST ISSUE epilogue is here, and I'm once again using this space to issue a challenge to you, our hot-blooded readers! You've just read all about games in the beat-'em-up genre, and more than a few classics in this particular gaming category. The challenge, then, is can you clear one? Can you beat a beat-'em-up?

Your easiest point of access, as we noted back in the Retro section this time, is probably the apps on offer through Nintendo Switch Online. There, Double Dragon, River City Ransom and Double Dragon II are available in the NES selection, some lesser examples of the genre like Rival Turf! and Brawl Brothers are in the SNES lineup and the Genesis app has Golden Axe and the legendary Streets of Rage 2. Some of them are easier than others, but Restore Points and the rewind feature are available for all of them, so with some patience you could see them through to the end.

An easier avenue I mentioned back on Page 28 is the Capcom Beat 'Em Up Bundle, which is very frequently on sale in the eShop. (I snagged it for just $9.99.) With its games set to "Free Play" you can just keep dropping in virtual quarters to dismiss the Game Over screen as many times as you need to and brute-force your way to the finish of any of its included titles.

Then there's always the classic Ninja Turtles games, as made newly available once again in the Cowabunga Collection! Most of them aren't too terribly tough, and you can always recruit a friend to jump in and kick shell alongside you.

Whichever option you opt for, I hope you enjoy the fight to the finish! Do it! Go! — **LUCAS**

(Final Fight's Cody has his priorities straight. Heroes can never rest while evil still stalks the streets!)

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